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**Revisiting Early Women's Magazines**

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# **SAMYUKTA: A JOURNAL of GENDER AND CULTURE**

Beginnings of Gender Discourses in  
Modern Keralam: Revisiting Early Women's Magazines

Vol. 7 No. 1 (Jan 2022):

**WOMEN'S INITIATIVES**

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## Guest Editorial

This number is about early women's magazines in Keralam that mark an important phase in the history of women's writing, feminist movement, and modern gender formations. The last decades of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century witnessed an explosion in women's magazines in the major languages spoken in the Indian subcontinent. Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha in their landmark work *Women Writing in India* (1991) identify the period as "a high point of women's journalism." They note that in the regional languages, women edited magazines for women. This trend across languages was generally the result of the projects of colonial modernity and reformist movements.

Curiously, many of the early women's magazines in Keralam were edited and published by men. This changed subsequently as magazines were launched by women editors and publishers, many of whom had benefitted from the colonial education system. These editors were mostly first-generation scholars from the upwardly mobile castes. The complex social formations which were a result of the colonial rule, the English education, the rise of print media and press, the freedom struggle and the reformations which oscillated between tradition and modernity, had urged women to rethink their position in the society. The early women's magazines from Keralam reflected this cultural turn, critiquing hierarchical relations of authority between women and men that had historically functioned to the disadvantage of women.

Magazines got published in Malayalam from the 1840s by missionaries and social reformers. However, women's magazines started appearing in Malayalam only towards the last decade of the 19th century, and continued through the first three decades of the 20th century. Most economically and socially privileged communities which came to the fore during this period had their own women's magazines. Several magazines such as *Keraliyasugunabodhini* (1886), *Sarada* (1904), *Lakshmibai* (1905), *Mahilaratnam* (1916), *Mahila* (1921), *Sahodari* (1925), *Mahilamandiram* (1927), *Malayalamanika* (1931), and *Stree* (1933) were in circulation during this period.

Early women's magazines have played a crucial role in the formation and structuring of modern gender identities and social relations. These interventions of a generation of women who stood at the crossroads of tradition and modernity tell us about the negotiations, revolts and resistances they encountered in carving out a space for themselves. The women's magazines urged women to recast femininity, instructing them on the new social/sexual contracts and duties. Women from the non-privileged sections of the society like dalits, tribals, transgenders, and sexual minorities did not figure in these discussions directly. It was as recent as the 1980s and 90s that the early women's magazines were researched and studied closely, drawing attention to the sidelining of the non-privileged.

As more than hundred years separate us from the early women's magazines in Malayalam, it is essential to revisit them to understand the significant factors that have shaped the formative period of modern gender identities in Keralam. The discourses that unfolded in the pages of the early women's magazines interrogated the ways gender identities were constituted differently in different social classes/castes/sections. The present issue of *Samyukta* examines women's magazines of the long 19<sup>th</sup> century, and reviews the ways these magazines imagined and advocated gender identities in Keralam as notions of gender are intrinsically linked to structures of gender relations in any society.

Guest Editor:

**Shalini M**

## **Beginnings of Gender Discourses in Modern Keralam: Revisiting Early Women's Magazines**

**Dr. Shalini. M.**

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Gender has been a buzzword of the 21st century. Gender, another word for sexual difference, a column that asked one to spell out if you are a male or female, has become a term loaded with meanings in the contemporary world. Despite differing opinions on how gender is understood, contemporary critical theory has identified gender as one of the fundamental organizing principles around which social life is shaped. Biology as the final destination in connection with gender identity was questioned in the 1980s by Judith Butler, who took cues from earlier feminists like Simone de Beauvoir and Monique Wittig and suggested that women are an imagined group. Concepts like femininity and masculinity, which were until then considered as decided only by biology, were interrogated and found as contingent categories. The performative and socio-cultural aspects of gender proposed by Butler changed the way we look at the category gender and issues pertaining to it (Butler, *Gender Trouble*). However, old norms and prejudices too exist along with these new propositions, asserting themselves and finding newer ways to sell older essences in new bottles. Therefore, the contemporary world witnesses and bears the anxieties of a gendered society while also producing discourses on gender neutrality and postgenderism. Nivedita Menon explains the paradoxical ways in which gender is used in India. She looks at how on the one hand, it has challenged the notion of woman as a category and how it gets more regressively used as a synonym for woman in state developmental projects on the other hand (Menon 94).

Early women's magazines mark an important phase in the history of women's writing, feminist movement, and modern gender formations. These magazines are probably the first organized documentations on beginnings of modern family, division of labour based on sex, women's education, and so on in a colony. The last decades of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century witnessed an explosion in women's magazines in the major languages



spoken in the Indian subcontinent. Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, in their landmark work *Women Writing in India* (1991), identify the period as “a high point of women’s journalism” (xviii). They note that in the regional languages, women edited magazines for women. This trend across languages was generally the result of the projects of colonial modernity and reformist movements.

Curiously, many of the early women's magazines in Keralam were initially edited and published by men. This changed subsequently as magazines were launched by women editors and publishers, many of whom had benefitted from the colonial education system. These editors were mainly first-generation scholars from the upwardly mobile castes. The complex social formations resulting from colonial rule, English education, the rise of print media and press, the freedom struggle and the reformations that oscillated between tradition and modernity had urged women to rethink their position in society. The early women's magazines from Keralam reflected this cultural turn, critiquing hierarchical relations of authority between women and men that had historically functioned to the disadvantage of women. This rethinking and redefining delineated the social domains, bringing in notions of domesticity, social and sexual contracts and also reflected the enhanced public role of women. The nationalist as well as socialist interventions which deliberated freedom, democracy and civic roles further complicated the responsibilities of women at home and in the world.

Malayalam had journals from 1840s onwards brought out by missionaries, social reformers and others. However, women's magazines started appearing in Malayalam only towards the last decade of the 19th century and flourished through the first three decades of the 20th century. Most economically and socially privileged communities which came to the fore during this period had their own women's magazines. Several magazines such as *Keraliyasugunabodhini* (1886), *Sarada* (1904), *Lakshmibai* (1905), *Mahilaratnam* (1916), *Mahila* (1921), *Sahodari* (1925), *Mahilamandiram* (1927), *Malayalamanika* (1931), and *Stree* (1933) were in circulation during this period. The early women’s magazines covered topics like women’s education, civic rights, leisure, culinary skills, beauty, health and hygiene, motherhood, chastity, conjugality and so on.

Early women's magazines have played a crucial role in the formation and structuring of modern gender identities and social relations. These interventions of a generation of women who stood at the crossroads of tradition and modernity tell us about the negotiations, revolts, and resistances they encountered in carving out a space for themselves. These women's magazines urged women to recast femininity, instructing them on the new social/sexual

contracts and duties. Partha Chatterjee in his work “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question” points out that discourses on women’s issues took a backseat in the post-independence phase. In the case of Keralam too, one can observe that women’s issues were hardly discussed during this phase. As a result, these vibrant episodes of women’s writing went into oblivion in the decades that followed. These forgotten episodes of women’s history were revisited and researched closely only in the 1980s and 90s as part of reconstructing feminist genealogies. Pioneering works in this area have been carried out by scholars like J. Devika who explored and introduced the vastness of the field to the academic community. Her contributions in this area were probably the first and the most significant in this regard.

As more than a hundred years separate us from the early women's magazines in Malayalam, it is essential to revisit them to understand the significant factors that have shaped the formative period of modern gender identities in Keralam. The apparent concern of these texts may be the question of femininity of a particular kind with certain social and economic privileges. Nevertheless, it is clear that any gender for that matter exists only in the context of a whole structure of gender relations as R. W. Connell puts it (30). Since gender identities cannot be understood in isolation, these texts also act as significant moments in the way femininities, masculinities and other forms of gendered identities were imagined and formed during this period. A revisit to these sites which combined the traditional and dominant notions of gender roles with that of western notions of self and morality enables us to understand the complex ways in which gender identities are manufactured and circulated. The discourses that unfolded in the pages of the early women's magazines interrogated the ways gender identities were constituted differently in different social classes/castes/sections. It is also crucial to note that women from non-privileged sections like sexual minorities, Dalit, tribal, and others hardly figured in these discussions directly but were indirectly counterpointed as the Other. These exclusionary frames too need to be studied with serious attention. The present issue of *Samyukta* is an attempt to revisit these documents and re-view the ways these magazines imagined and advocated gender identities in Keralam.

The issue carries eight articles from scholars and researchers who have worked in this area. The first article by Teena Antony titled “An Introduction to the Early Malayalam Women's Magazines” provides an overview of the early Malayalam women's magazines and introduces some important discussions that figured in these early writings. She observes that these magazines maintained a serious tone and focused on issues related to reform and education rather than on entertainment. This aspect sure is in stark contrast with contemporary

women's magazines, which focus more on entertaining the reader within the constraints of roles and duties assigned to women. She also observes that this change from the reformatory to recreational or emancipatory to entertaining could also be due to the loss of idiosyncrasies inherent in the multiple print media scenario. This shift from print media to mass media brought profitability and marketability as the focal aspects of magazines. However, entertainment here is not seen as frivolous, but are confined to the roles assigned to women. In that sense, Teena Antony's article reflects how women's magazines of contemporary times have stopped attempting to redefine femininity but revel within the available definitions of privileged feminine roles.

The article titled "Shaping of Colonial Bodies: The Ambivalence in the Writings of Early Women's Magazines in Malayalam" by Anna Karthika looks at the ambivalence of Malayalam women's magazines of the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century in negotiating the construction of gendered colonial bodies. The article looks at how these magazines simultaneously incorporated and interrogated the colonial reform discourse and attempted to regulate the native female bodies. She argues that these writings attempt to decentre the colonial project of shaping the colonial subject and body. Thus, she proposes that, these writings have, in turn, been critical in shaping the idea of the modern body. Anna Karthika's article calls for a closer look at these discourses as to how the present codes of femininity and masculinity were formed due to conflicting yet converging tendencies of tradition and modernity. Roopa Philip's article titled "The Woman's Question: Negotiating Modernity in Early Twentieth-Century Women's Magazines in Malayalam" takes it forward by looking at how "woman" occupied a centre stage in the discourses of reform and nationalism. The cultural anxieties that resulted from social changes brought in by colonialism, nationalism and reform identified women as representatives of home/tradition/spiritual sphere, which stood in opposition to the public sphere. Roopa Philip's analysis, however, points to varying responses of women from these times that resisted the role assigning tendencies. These responses also critiqued and mediated the cultural anxieties and limitations that marked women's roles and rights. While these early magazines and the writings which appeared in them seemed to have carved and solidified modern gender divisions, identifying these moments of resistance is essential in contesting these gendered divisions.

In the article "Contesting Sartorial Reforms: The Discourse in Colonial Malabar," Ashwini. V. attempts an exciting inquiry into the discourses of sartorial reforms in the early

twentieth century Malabar and the participation of women in these discourses. Sartorial codes were one of the most apparent forms through which modernity made itself visible. She observes how *parishkaram* (reform), a by-product of colonial modernity and nationalist reform, was ridiculed and mocked while also debating the level of 'modern' influence to be acceptable in the sartorial realm. Ashwini's work indicates how women's sartorial reforms had to encounter vigorous scrutiny compared to reforms in male sartorial codes. This shows how the social roles of men and women were intended to maintain undisturbed during these processes of modernising and reform. As androgynous sartorial codes transform the contemporary fashion world, it would be interesting to go back to these discourses to see how dress code became a code for gender, sexuality, sexual orientation, class, caste and other intersectionalities.

As mentioned above, women's education was one of the thrust areas of most of the reform movements. And a majority of these reform movements also operated differently at the level of various caste communities. Sreebitha. P. V.'s article "The Question of English and Higher Education: Early Twentieth Century Ezhava Women's Magazines in Kerala" looks at the issue of English and higher education for women, which appeared in select Ezhava women's magazines and other Thiyya and Ezhava magazines. The paper focuses on the historical aspects of prejudices against the lower castes in opening schools for them, resistances of Ezhava reformers in facilitating English and higher education to women from their community while also linking it to the contemporary discourses on English education and lower castes in India. The article also highlights the paradoxical nature of reform itself, which often resorted to applying different standards depending upon gender, caste, and class and connects it to contemporary discourses on caste and colonial education.

Whyni Gopi's article looks at the positive changes of reforms and the role played by women's magazines in doing so. She looks at select writings which appeared in *Sarada* and *Lakshmibai*, the early women magazines in Keralam, to see how these writings worked towards the reconstitution of family. Reshma P. K.'s article titled "Representation of Women Through Centuries" takes a closer look at select texts from *Mahilaratnam* (1916) and *Sahodari* (1925). She attempts to demonstrate the role of these early women's magazines in shaping the contemporary women's world by talking about issues which were not traditionally considered as women's space or sphere. Binumol Abraham's article titled "Unequal Laughter: Cartoons and Gender Stereotyping in Modern Kerala" takes these moments of social change ahead to

examine cartoons and comic strips that appeared in magazines and newspapers of the late 20th century Keralam and the stereotypical and archetypal representations of women and men portrayed in cartoons. Her analysis points out that while these cartoons ridicule modern women for their fashion, life style, and preferences, men are mocked at for being 'henpecked' and for their inability to exert any power over women. The analysis and arguments that the article put forward, despite focusing on a set of texts that belong to a later period, suggest the contradictions present within reform and its gendered nature.

The present issue and the papers included here can only be considered as an attempt to open up this large field of inquiry for further research. The contemporary Keralam has witnessed many socio-political debates and issues pertaining to gender. The break of the millennium saw a series of assertions from groups belonging to different identities which tell us about a modernity that is partial and prejudiced. Minoritarian and subaltern protests from Keralam spoke about how the past has been unfair to the marginalised. These critiques have questioned the seemingly monolithic categories of men and women and all the binaries that are built in and around the gendered identities. Local and global issues – Adivasi land struggles, environmental issues and subaltern protests, sexual harassment, violence against women and the marginalized, controversies concerning religion and women, and so much more from the socio-political sphere have problematized the way gender identities are manufactured in our society. It is also necessary to read these moments in the light of recent self/life writings from social as well as sexual minorities. As V. Geetha points out rightly in her forward to *Her-Self* (2005): “These texts are part of our feminist genealogy and need to be read as such – not as testimonies to a greater or lesser political correctness, but as part of a past that is at once local and global” (“Texts That Dazzle” xix).

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# An Introduction to the Early Malayalam Women's Magazines

Dr Teena Antony

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**Abstract:** Malayalam magazines for women are usually analysed as an adjunct to mass media studies or as part of the larger cultural sphere of Kerala. There are very few studies on the twenty-five or more magazines published for women in colonial Kerala as a field in itself. Women's magazines published during the colonial times focused more on their education and progress than providing entertainment. In Kerala, they were also owned, edited, and authored by some of the early feminists. As such these magazines provide a vibrant women's history different from the canonical history of Kerala. The ideas and issues discussed in the magazines informed and shaped the public sphere in Kerala for decades into the future. This paper is in the form of an exploratory study of the field. It probes the intended readers, the writers, and the concepts and topics that were under discussion in early Malayalam women's magazines.

**Keywords:** Women's history, Malayalam women's magazines, periodicals for women, women in colonial Kerala

## Introduction

Special publications for women in Malayalam were started in 1888. The publication of *Keraleeya Suguna Bodhini* was started by the royal decree of Kerala Varma Valiya Koi Thampuran, the then King of Travancore. In addition, women's publications such as *Sharadha* (1904), *Lakshmi Bhai* (1906), *Bhasha Sharadha* (1914) and *Mahila Ratnam* (1925) were in circulation. "It is apparent that, most of these publications dealt with topics such as cooking, art, and decoration" (emphasis added) (K.P. 11).

The above quote is from an academic essay about one of the women editors, writers, and publishers from Kerala. However, even when lauding the editor/writer/publisher, there is a

dismissal of the entire genre of women's magazines from early Kerala (which consisted of the princely states of Travancore and Cochin, and British Malabar). Periodicals for women, especially those that were edited by women, cannot by any stretch of the imagination be relegated as dealing only with "cooking, art, and decoration". They dealt with diverse issues. While the topics can be classified as being generally women-centric, they had a broader focus in terms of the aspects of women's lives that they discussed. Nevertheless, history has not recorded the considerable and critical role played by women's periodicals. Scholarly works have pointed out the systematic erasure and outright misogyny inherent in contemporary Kerala (For details, see Devika and Sukumar; Devika, "Clue to Why"), especially in the field of literature and literary studies. There is very little information available in the public sphere or even academic circles about the scores of women's magazines, women writers, political activists, and social reformers from the twentieth century (and before). Most of the women's magazines of the period were run by early Malayali feminists. These women were accomplished in other spheres of life. There were teachers, legislators, councillors, doctors, writers, scholars, and students contributing articles to the magazines. As such, their tone and engagement with the topics under discussion in the periodicals were different as I will detail in the following sections.

This article is divided into three sections. The first part deals with the intended reader, circulation figures, and writers of the magazines. In the second section, I give an overview of the Malayalam women's magazines that were being published in the first half of the twentieth century. In the final section, I review the subjects and concepts that were frequently discussed in the women's periodicals from colonial Kerala.

### **Who were the readers and writers?**

By current standards, the early Malayalam periodicals did not have many readers. The largest subscription figure for a women's magazine, as per administrative documents, is 2000. This was for *Vanitha Kusumam*, which started publication from Kottayam in 1927 (*The Statistics of Travancore 1929-1930*, hereafter *TST* 378; Priyadarshanan 182). The (*Christhava Mahilamani*) had the next highest publication figure at 1500. It was published from Thiruvalla (*TST* 370). In Thrissur, *Lakshmibai* had a subscription figure of 1300 (*Report on the Administration of Cochin for the year 1090 M.E.* 50). One of the longest-running women's magazines to be owned and edited by women was *Mahila*. It was started in 1921 and went



on to be published for twenty years (Rekha 91). This magazine was also subscribed to in government schools from 1924. The government documents put the subscription figures for *Mahila* at 500 (TST 371).

The population of Travancore according to the 1921 census was around 40 lakhs (*Travancore Administration Report 1929-30*, hereafter *TAR 1929-30* 2). Around 4 lakh students were enrolled in schools of which a little less than half were girls. The number of departmental schools for the same period varied between 1100 to 1150 (200-201). Therefore, considering the number of students and the population, the subscription numbers for *Mahila* are not high. The highest subscription figure for a Malayalam publication in the period, according to government documents, was only 5000. Thus, the circulation figures for these women's magazines were not abysmal, rather they did quite well for the period.

The periodicals were pitched to a group that could afford to subscribe to them at ₹2 to ₹4 per annum or that had access to them in an educational institution, reading room, or library. Though the magazines were supposedly for all women, there were quite a few that were printed for women belonging to specific communities. There were also magazines started for women from specific communities that later catered to other communities as well. The magazines did not outwardly publicise or present themselves as belonging to a particular region. Despite that, there would be issues specific to a region (Travancore, Cochin, or Malabar) or articles addressing women from a particular region (essays starting with the salutation "My sisters in Kochi"). The periodicals had the primary objective of educating and improving the status/condition of women. Entertainment was secondary to the primary objective of education. Here education does not stand for the act of going to school, rather it stands for a broader definition of the term. This consisted of broadening the world view of the women, introducing them to happenings in other parts of India and the world, having discussions on issues specific to women and laying these out in non-academic or easy to understand language, and allowing women to practise their literacy skills in terms of reading and writing.

There are no records of the actual number of women who contributed to the various women's magazines that were published in colonial Kerala. However, rough estimates put this number at somewhere above 220. Biographical details available about a majority of these writers are scant. The following paragraph introduces a few women writers.

M. Haleema Beevi was the writer, editor, and proprietor of four periodicals—three of these were women’s magazines. She was a municipal councillor at Thiruvalla for five years (Muringatheri). She was the first Muslim woman to become a councillor in Kerala. She was part of the Independence movement and had been jailed during the regime of Dewan C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer. Anna Chandy, another writer, was the first woman judge in India, and later the first woman High Court judge in the country. She was a vociferous champion of women’s rights in the public sphere and private realm of the family. K. Chinnamma held the position of Assistant Inspectress at the Travancore Education Department (Devika, “Her-self” 29). She also ran an institution to educate and train girls from poor families. K. Chinnamallu Amma was a teacher and social reformer (Devika, “Her-self” 75). B. Kalyani Amma was a teacher, author, and social reformer. She edited two different women’s magazines at different times. B. Bhagirathy Amma was a public speaker and an advocate of an “active, informed and disciplined domestic role” for women (Devika, “Women and Literature”). B. Anandavalli Amma was a professor and later principal of the Women’s College in Thiruvananthapuram (Saradamoni 123). Tharavath Ammalu Amma was an author and a Sanskrit and Tamil scholar. She had translated several works from Sanskrit and English into Malayalam. A few of her books were in use as textbooks (“Tharavath Ammalu Amma”). She took an active part in the literary scene, including chairing the Sahitya Parishath meetings in the 1920s and 1930s. The women’s magazines had articles by non-Malayali women also. Muthulakshmi Reddy, the Tamil doctor, social reformer, and member of the Madras Legislative Council, contributed articles regularly to Malayalam magazines. Additionally, the women’s periodicals carried translated works of authors from other parts of India and the world.

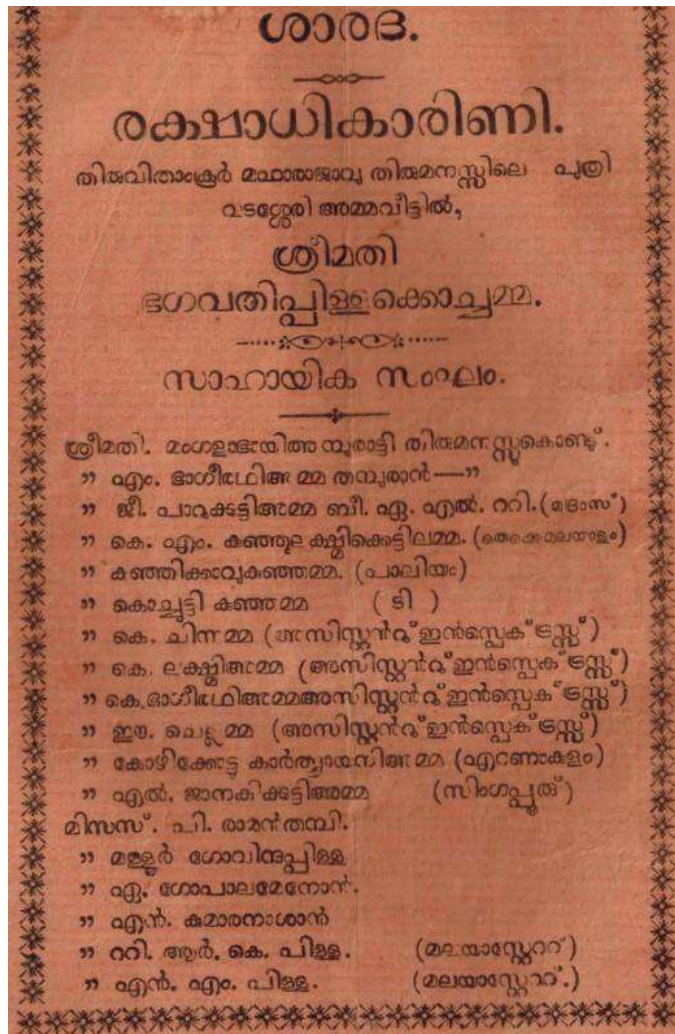


Figure 1. Inside cover of *Sharada* (1919, vol. 4, no. 12) with the list of patrons and the editorial team

In other words, these were the first and second generation of women who had been educated through the then modern schools—schools that had been instituted by the missionaries, government, and private entities, which were different from the *ezhuthupally* (local school run by a single teacher), *asankalari* (single teacher school run at her/his home) or home-schooling done under traditional teachers. Even when these women were not educated in the modern schools, they had access, contacts, and the wherewithal to start, write, edit and/or run these magazines. The writers of the time, both women and men, contributed to several magazines, were editors of multiple magazines, and/or were prominent in the public sphere in different capacities.

In the section following this, I give a short introduction to the women’s magazines that were published in Malayalam-speaking regions—Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar—till 1950. At

the outset, there are a few things, that this research article would like to point the readers' attention to. (a) One of the serious issues with historical research is the lack of access to systematic documentation. Hence, there would be lacunae in the figures and details of the magazines. (b) Many of the periodicals from this period that are available in the public archives belong to hegemonic castes and communities. A reading of the past through these periodicals is, in consequence, bound to be influenced by hegemonic ideas of that period. Simultaneously, it should be remembered that these magazines were not representative of other communities, particularly subaltern groups. (c) The early Malayalam magazines did not have the kind of reach and readership enjoyed by contemporary women's magazines. And (d), though most research aspires to take an objective standpoint, our location in the present and our beliefs and ideology are the lenses through which we read and analyse the past.

### Which were the magazines?

*Keraliya Sugunabodhini*, the first women's magazine from Kerala was printed from Thiruvananthapuram sometime in the 1880s (different sources put the year at 1884, 1885, or 1886). Scholars are divided as to whether the magazine had any women writers, although some of the articles in the magazine purportedly had women's names in the authorial space (Priyadarshanan 14; Rekha 80, 84). The magazine had poetry, essays on social issues, astrology, Ayurveda, short stories, reviews of literary works, biographies, and short news articles (Rekha 80-81). Though the magazine was started for women, the content was literary. There were not many articles that dealt with women-specific issues.

Sl no.	Name of Magazine	Year(s)	Place(s) of publication
1	<i>Keraliya Sugunabodhini</i>	mid 1880s	Thiruvananthapuram
2	<i>Sharada</i>	1904-1910	Thripunithura
3	<i>Lakshmibai</i>	1905-1940	Thrissur
4	<i>Sharada</i>	1913-1924	Thiruvananthapuram/Punalur
5	<i>Bhashasharada</i>	1915-1919	Punalur
6	<i>Mahilaratnam</i>	1916	Thiruvananthapuram
7	<i>Sumangala</i>	1916	Kayamkulam
8	<i>Sanghamitra</i>	1920	Kollam

9	<i>(Christhava) Mahilamani</i>	1920- 1940s	Thiruvalla
10	<i>Mahila</i>	1921-1941	Thiruvananthapuram/Thiruvalla/Chengannur
11	<i>Sevini</i>	1924	Kollam
12	<i>Araya Stree Jana Masika</i>	1924	Karunagapally
13	<i>Muslim Mahila</i>	1926	Cochin
14	<i>Sahodari</i>	1925- 1940s	Kollam
15	<i>Vanitha Kusumam</i>	1927	Kottayam
16	<i>Mahila Mandiram</i>	1927	Thiruvananthapuram
17	<i>Sreemathi</i>	late 1920s	Thiruvananthapuram and Kottayam
18	<i>Malayalamasika</i>	1930	Kozhikode
19	<i>Sthree</i>	1933	Ernakulam
20	<i>Muslim Vanitha</i>	1938	Thiruvalla/Kodungalloor
21	<i>Vanita Ratnam</i>	late 1930s	Thiruvalla
22	<i>Vanitharamam</i>	1942- 1950s	Kottayam
23	<i>Vanitha</i>	1944	Thiruvalla
24	<i>Vanithamitram</i>	1944	Thiruvananthapuram/Kayamkulam
25	<i>Aruna</i>	1950	Kozhikode

Figure 2. List of early women's magazines with the year(s) and place(s) of publication

The next women's magazine to be published in Malayalam-speaking regions was *Sharada* in 1904. It had three women editors, T.C. Kalyani Amma, T. Ammukutty Amma, and B. Kalyani Amma ("Swayamprasthavana" 3). The magazine went on till 1910 with a break in between (Rekha 85-86). In 1913, another magazine called *Sharada* was published by T.K. Kalyanikutty Amma. This magazine ran for around ten years (Rekha 86; *The Travancore Almanac & Directory 1921*, hereafter *TTAD 1921* 131; Madras Publicity Bureau 232).

In 1905, around the time *Sharada* was being published, a women's magazine called *Lakshmibai* began to be published from Thrissur in Cochin. This magazine was in circulation till 1940, but not continuously. *Lakshmibai* had 221 women writers according to Therambil

Sankunni Menon as quoted by Rekha (86-87). *Mary Rani* was another magazine for women that started from Thripunithura (in Cochin) in 1913. The magazine was owned and edited by men, but the articles were similar to those found in then contemporaneous women's magazines (Rekha 86-87) and it had women writers. *Mary Rani* was quite popular for that time with a subscription figure of 600 (*Report on the Administration of Cochin 1915* 50).

The most popular magazine, going by circulation figures, was *Vanitha Kusumam*. It had around 2000 subscribers which went up to 3000 (Rekha 94). This magazine was started in Kottayam in 1927. Eminent women writers, reformers, and politicians of the time wrote in this magazine. The magazine carried pictures of events and famous people unlike other women's magazines from the early twentieth century. The records do not provide information on how long the magazine existed. *TTAD* for 1930 lists *Vanitha Kusumam*, but not the one for 1937. The magazine may have been in print for only three to four years.

In terms of subscription figures, in the first decades of the twentieth century, periodicals run by the Christian communities (even among women's magazines) had more readers. This could be attributed to the cohesiveness and close-knit structure of these communities which made dispersal/circulation easier for their periodicals. People from castes within the Hindu religion started coming together as formalised communities in the early twentieth century, while the different sects of Christians already had community structures and contacts through their churches and leaders. They were also the first groups to have access to modern printing presses in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. When communities began forming organised and formal structures, they started periodicals for the upliftment/development/emancipation of their members.

*Sanghamitra* was a periodical that began publication from Kollam, specifically for the Ezhava women, in 1920. The writers of this magazine overlapped with then concurrent magazines (Rekha 90). *Sanghamitra* was in existence for three to four years and was edited by P.K.N. Vaidhyan (*TTAD 1922* 101). *Sevini* was another periodical that began publication from Kollam in 1924. It had financial support from the prominent Ezhavas in the region (Rekha 92). Many of the women writers wrote in this magazine. It was meant for the upliftment of both women and students, according to its editorial (Rekha 92-93).

*Mahila*, as mentioned before, commenced from Thiruvananthapuram in 1921, and was later moved to Thiruvalla and then Chengannur (*TTAD 1937* 167). *Mahila* was owned and edited

by B. Bhagirathy Amma (TST 371). Yet another magazine, *Christhava Mahilamani* started publication in 1920 from Thiruvalla. It was in print till the mid-1940s and was hugely popular in both Travancore and Malabar with an estimated circulation of 1500 copies (Pradeep; TST 370). The magazine was meant for Christian women in the beginning. The “*Christhava*” was dropped from the name in 1932 when the proprietor realised that people were not subscribing to the magazine in Cochin thinking it was a Church magazine for proselytisation (Pradeep).

*Araya Stree Jana Masika* (called *Arayathi Janamasika* in other locations) was started for Araya women by Dr Velukutty Arayan in 1924. There is not much information available about this periodical besides that it was printed from Karunagapally. *Bhashasharada*, *Mahilaratnam*, and *Sumangala* began printing from Punalur in 1915, Thiruvananthapuram in 1916, and Kayamkulam in 1916, respectively (Rekha 88; Priyadarshanan 105, 111). *Sumangala* was more in the line of a family magazine and none of these magazines lasted for long.

*Sahodari* began from Kollam in 1925 (Priyadarshanan 178). Like many other women’s magazines, it had a break in publication. From the third volume, *Sahodari* re-started in the mid-1940s. By then, the magazine was more like a general literary magazine with short stories, poetry, a few essays based on current affairs, and had no articles with women-specific focus.

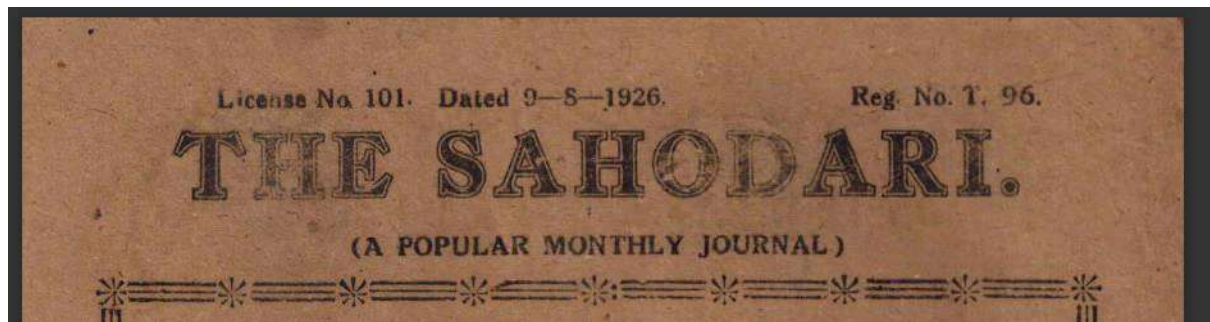


Figure 3. Top of the back cover of *Sahodari* (1945, vol. 3, no. 12) with the licence number from 1926.

The *Muslim Mahila* was launched in 1926 to better the condition of Muslim women. Published from Cochin, this periodical had many Muslim and Christian writers (Rekha 93). Another magazine called *Muslim Vanitha* was brought out by M. Haleema Beevi (mentioned at the beginning of this article) from Thiruvalla in 1938. This magazine had to be stopped due to a financial crunch and backlash from conservatives within the Muslim community (M.P.).

However, Haleema Beevi went on to start a general monthly by the name *Bharatha Chandrika* in 1944 (K.P. 11). Many of the well-known authors and poets of the time contributed to *Bharatha Chandrika*. It was converted to a daily in 1947. She also started a women's magazine called *Vanitha* in 1944.

The periodical, *Sthree*, was set up by the social reformer, K. Sahodaran Aiyappan and edited by his wife Parvathy Aiyappan. The magazine began to be printed from Ernakulam in 1933 and many of the writers were women. Starting in 1927 at Thiruvananthapuram, *Mahila Mandiram* was launched under the patronage of the Sreemoolam Shashtipoorthi Memorial Mahilamandiram. It had a good circulation figure of 1400 (TST 363), but like other women's periodicals it does not appear to have run for more than a few years. There is no mention of the magazine in TTAD 1937.

*Srimathi* was brought out sometime in the late 1920s. The government documents list two magazines, one spelt *Sreemathi* and edited by Mrs Anna Chandi in 1930 (TTAD 1930 141) and another spelt *Srimathi* and edited by Sri. C.O. Ponnammamma in 1937 (TTAD 1937 164). *Sreemathi* was published simultaneously from Thiruvananthapuram and Kottayam, while *Srimathi* was published from Thiruvananthapuram alone. The magazines were possibly the same since writers and editors of the time were part of interconnected social networks. Though Anna Chandy is the listed editor in the government document, in actual practice, the periodical was edited by a group of women including V.M. Katherine, A. Vijayamma, Bhagavaty Lakshmy Ammal, and C.P. Saradamma (Devika, "Clue to Why"). The magazine(s) lasted only for a few years (Rekha 98).

The *Malayalamasika* requires special mention here since it was the first women's magazine to be published from Malabar, specifically Kozhikode in 1930. One of the editors of the magazine was B. Kalyani Amma who had been the editor of the earlier *Sharada. Aruna*, which possibly started publication in 1950, seems to be the next women's magazine to be printed from Kozhikode. This magazine had colour pictures from the mid-1950. *Aruna* also carried news items about cinema together with articles for women.



വിഷയവിവരം	
	പേജ്
1. മലയാളം—ഇംഗ്ലീഷ് അനുകരണം	
2. ദാഹ്യം സംസ്കാരം— സാമൂഹിക	5
3. പുതിയ കലാരംഗം (ചെറുകഥ)— തൃവിക	6
4. യുവസംഭാഷണം— പി. ആർ. കെ. നായർ	9
5. ജീവിതവൈകാരിക (പ്രശ്നം)— മിസ്സിസ് അമ്മിനി കെ. മേനോൻ	10
6. ഗാനനാമിക— സി. പി. സുരേ	11
7. ആത്മീയത (ചെറുകഥ)— സുരേന്ദ്രൻ നാരായണി	14
8. ഇംഗ്ലീഷ് അനുകരണം— പി. കെ. മേനോൻ	17
9. പുരുഷാഭിപ്രായങ്ങൾ— കെ. പി. സി. വാഴ	20
10. തീയതികൾ—നാസർ	21
11. സുരേ—സുരേന്ദ്രൻ	23
12. പക്ഷികൾ ഗാനം (പ്രശ്നം)— കെ. പി. സി. വാഴ	26
13. വാർത്താ അനുഭവം— സുരേന്ദ്രൻ	27
14. 12 വയസ്സുള്ള ഗാനകന്തരി	30
15. അഭിപ്രായം	31

Confidently recommended



ആർ. കെ. മേനോൻ  
കുടുംബശ്രീയും സാമൂഹിക  
ജീവിതവും കൂടുതൽ  
ആർ. കെ. മേനോൻ  
കുടുംബശ്രീയും സാമൂഹിക  
ജീവിതവും കൂടുതൽ  
ആർ. കെ. മേനോൻ  
കുടുംബശ്രീയും സാമൂഹിക  
ജീവിതവും കൂടുതൽ

“യൂട്ടറാടോൺ”  
ശിശുശാസ്ത്രം

UTERATONE  
Sold at all Chemists,  
BLOOD-IN-DRAKSHA  
LABORATORIES,  
KOTTAYAM.

Figure 4. Content page of *Aruna* (October 1950, vol. 1, no. 8).

*Vanitharamam* was published from Kottayam from 1942 onwards. Like *Mahila*, this magazine was also subscribed to in schools and colleges. It had literary and language-related articles (Rekha 98). *Vanithamitram* commenced in 1944 from Thiruvananthapuram and was later moved to Kayamkulam. Details are not available for *Vanita Ratnam*, another magazine, except that it was being printed from Thiruvalla in 1937 with K.C. Achamma as the proprietor and editor (TTAD 1937 168).

The public archives do not have copies of many of these periodicals. Most of the issues of *Mahila*, *Sharada*, *Sreemathi*, and *Lakshmibai* are obtainable in a few government archives. Some of the community and caste-based magazines are available in private libraries and collections. The lack of access to most of these magazines are interstices in our understanding of the era—a lack that may or may not change our current understanding of the period. Nevertheless, the existence of 25 (or more) magazines specifically for women in a span of half a century is something that needs to be studied and analysed further. These magazines did not exist in a vacuum, separate from each other. In the case of *Sharada*, when the first magazine stopped, another publication was started under the same name. Before Haleema Beevi brought out *Bharatha Chandrika* in 1944, there was another weekly being

printed at Kollam under the same name and owned by M.K. Abdulrahiman Kutty (*TTAD* 1930 137). Sometimes, an article that appeared in one magazine had responses appearing in another magazine. For instance, in the September 1945 issue of *Sahodari*, there was an article titled “Nalla Chilla Kathakal” (some good stories) by Moorkoth Kunjappa. This was written in response to articles written by someone called “G.M.” in the magazine, *Mangalodayam* in the January and February issues of the same year. The prominent writers, editors, and owners knew each other. B. Kalyani Amma was the editor of *Sharada* and *Malayalamasika* as aforementioned. The editor of *Mahila* was her sister and the editor of *Mahila Mandiram* was her friend. Haleema Beevi and her husband helped the owners of *Malayala Manorama* when they ran into problems with the authorities. Additionally, the writers of many of the magazines overlapped as mentioned earlier.

Not all the periodicals listed here appear in the government documents. This could be because (a) they did not last long enough or had sufficient circulation to appear in the records, (b) they were not licenced periodicals, and (c) the government records consulted for this paper were not exhaustive. In the following section, I look at certain recurring issues or ideas that were discussed in the women’s magazines.

### **What did the early magazines write about?**

Women’s magazines in Malayalam went through various stages of evolution or transformation over the years, as they did in the rest of India. Francesca Orsini in her study of Hindi women’s journals identifies two phases: the first phase from the 1890s to the First World War and the second phase from the 1920s to 1940s. The first phase is when the magazines started to be published and they aimed to reform women into appropriate forms of domesticity. The second period is a radical period, where the focus was on “reforming society on women’s behalf” (138). This rough periodisation is applicable in the case of Malayalam-speaking regions, with certain differences stemming from the cultural specificities of the regions. Towards the mid-century, there is yet another transformation that happens in the content and vision of women’s magazines in Kerala. By then, it was assumed that women had achieved most of what they had set out to do. Thereafter the tone of the magazines was more relaxed. By this time, publications entered the “mass” media stage (Jeffrey 467). Robin Jeffrey differentiates three stages in the evolution of print and newspapers in Kerala. In the first stage, which he calls “rare”, printing presses existed and

were rare and exclusive. This went on till the 1870s. The second stage, he calls “scarce” (467). At this stage, print media was scarce, but potent. Print could influence people and in turn, create trouble for political authority.

In Kerala, the socio-cultural sphere was brimming with possibilities in the early twentieth century. Religious and caste groups were working towards the development of their community members. Missionary endeavour had sown the seeds of western knowledge. There was a redistribution of power and authority within governmental structures. New notions of rituals, faith, and religion had taken root among the populace. Economic production had diversified in terms of labour, technology, and ethics. Printing had taken off all over India. There was the rise of new civil society organisations like reading clubs, debating societies, women’s associations, etc.

If on the one hand, the first half of the twentieth century was rife with promise for printing establishments, on the other hand, the colonial and native governments were keeping a close watch on the press. The administration reports had columns detailing the subject matter of individual newspapers, periodicals, monthlies, etc. (Jeffrey 475-478). The *Report on the Administration of the Madras Presidency during the year 1914-15*, for instance, stated, “The powers of the Indian Press Act were applied in demanding security in 8 cases, and in forfeiting in 17. There was one prosecution under the Press and Registration of Books Act. The proprietors of 4 presses and the editors of 24 newspapers were warned for various reasons” (129).

Hence, women’s magazines were generally circumspect about what they printed. The *Cochin Administration Report for 1915* remarked of *Lakshmibai*, “This is ladies’ magazine containing literary matters only” and of *Mary Rani*, “Contains poetical contributions” (50). The periodicals for women touched upon a variety of subjects and issues. It was not that they did not write about current affairs. However, the manner in which the issue was presented was most often mellow, not incendiary.

The bulk of early women’s magazines falls within the categorisation of scarce media. The editors and writers were using this novel medium to discuss, debate, propagate, and disseminate issues and subjects that they thought pertained to women and that women needed to know. There were articles on women’s education, conjugality, childcare, reform involving rituals and customs specific to women, home management, chastity, dressing

styles, jewellery, and so on. Many magazines carried short biographies of famous women, both within and outside India. Other than these, there were short essays related to health, contraception, Ayurveda, medicines, hygiene, recipes, and even science. Art, music, and history found their place in the periodicals for women. Articles based on theology, astrology, spirituality, ethics, and economy can also be found in the colonial magazines for women in Kerala. Since education or furthering women's education and literacy was the main objective of these magazines there were short essays on current affairs, short stories, poetry, stories from the Puranas and mythology, literary criticism, and novels. Many eminent novelists, critics, and poets used to publish their work in both women's and general magazines/weeklies in colonial Kerala. Several magazines carried reports on the meetings held by the various women's groups or *samajams* that existed in the era. Women's magazines also carried accounts of the lifestyles of women from other parts of the world. A small section was set aside for advertisements. There were advertisements for hair oil, ayurvedic medicines and practices, treatments for sexual problems, infertility, contraception, menstruation, pregnancy-related complications, post-parturition care, digestive problems, tuberculosis, tiredness, muscle pain, etc. Shops selling clothes, batteries, dynamos, sewing supplies, rewinding shops, tailoring shops, and so on were also advertised in the women's magazines. In addition, one could find advertisements for other magazines, publications, and printing presses in these periodicals.

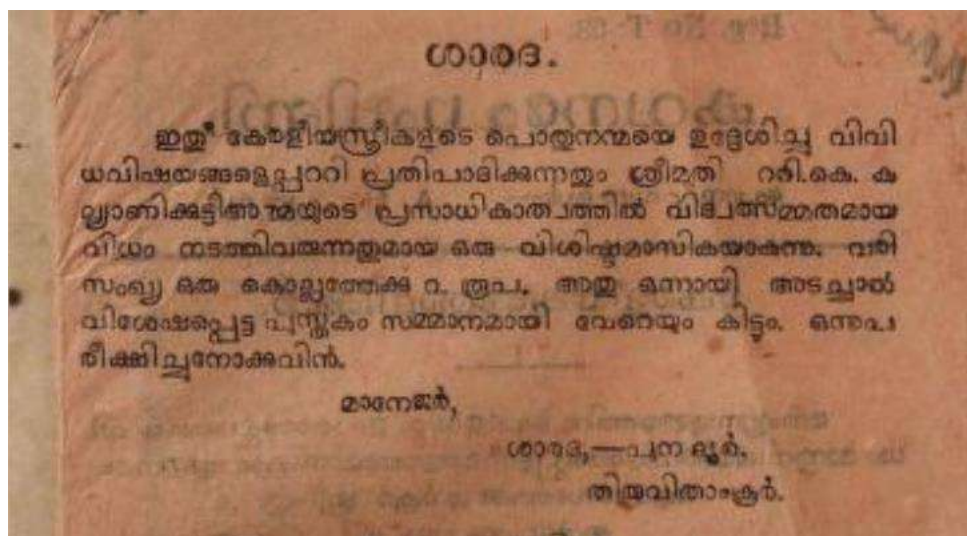


Figure 5. Advertisement of *Sharada* on the inner side of the back cover of *Kavanaposhini Masika* (1923, vol. 3, nos. 2-3)

Periodicals for women that existed before the 1920s in Malayalam-speaking regions had differing focus and concerns as compared to those that were published after this period. By the 1920s and 1930s, modern education was firmly established and caste and community groups had solidified. This was also when women were asking for rights and reservations in various locations, including the Travancore legislative assembly. More and more women were part of the public sphere in new capacities like nurses, doctors, teachers, school inspectors, orators, lawyers, editors, publishers, legislators *et al.* The discussions regarding women's education in the periodicals from before 1920 were mostly on whether women needed education. After that, the understanding was that women needed education and the focus moved on to the kind of education that women needed. Writers were vocalising discussions happening elsewhere on what was the modern woman, who was the modern woman, what were the factors that made her a woman, what needed to be done so that she remained a woman (and not become masculine/man). What was femininity or *sthreethwam*, what were women's *dharmam* (duties) towards the family, community, caste, and nation? Managing the home, servants, finances, husband, children, etc. were debated from various standpoints. Women were presented with role models both within and outside Malayalam-speaking regions.

One of the heated discussions was regarding the woman's chastity (Antony 31-32). There was a feeling that with the changing social landscape, influence of the West, and access to education, Malayali women would become more like Western women, follow western cultural markers, become individualistic, amoral, and more. This discussion on chastity found echoes in other parts of India, but in Kerala, it was also closely related to the position of women within matrilineal communities. The nuclear family (here it means the family group that had the parents and children and not the current two-child norm) was a relatively new phenomenon in that era. Within matrilineal communities, women were moving away from their maternal homes and moving in with their husbands as opposed to the custom of taking a sexual partner or entering a *sambandham* (roughly translated as consensual relationship) while staying in their natal families. The *sambandham* had come under a lot of criticism in colonial Kerala. It was perceived as an immoral and exploitative relationship. Likewise, among the patrilineal families, women and men were moving away from the joint family and starting nuclear families due to various reasons. The "modern" woman in the early twentieth

century, it was felt, was no longer under the direct control of the extended family. She had a mobility that came with this spatial move away from the joint family and also because of modern education and jobs. Women had more freedom than in the previous decades and centuries. There was a lot of fear that because of the changes wrought by the formation of the modern nuclear family, access to education, and opportunity to work, women would abandon their traditional roles within the family, caste, and community.

A woman's chastity did not revolve around the husband. It was an internal quality that led to the development and success of the marriage, family, society, and nation in the popular imagination. Mythological and historical women like Sita, Damayanti, Savitri, and Queen Victoria were evoked to emphasise the positive outcome of emulating this quality. Enculturing the quality of chastity was extremely important to many writers of the period. Even textbooks from the period had references to women's chastity (Antony 152-170). Allied to this idea was that of love marriages and arranged marriages. A legal or Sanskritic marriage ritual was the hegemonic ideal. The chaste, loyal, steadfast ideal woman/demi-goddess from mythology or the past was portrayed as enjoying an exalted position in ancient India. However, it was not that everyone subscribed to this view. Mrs C. Kuttannair, a magazine writer, for instance, pointed out that real women were neither treated in the same manner as goddesses nor did they aspire to be positioned as goddesses and queens in the home (422).

*Sthreedharmam* (women's duties) and *sthreeswatandryam* (women's freedom) were loaded ideas that were debated even more than chastity. *Sthreedharmam* was a blanket term that was linked to women's duties, qualities, chores, and activities. The duties included taking care of the husband, children, elderly relatives, the sick, and the poor. Being loving, capable, compassionate, humble, feminine, generous, etc. were part of women's *dharmam*. It incorporated chores like cooking, cleaning, gardening, childcare, etc. Conversation skills, money management, and even education were grouped under the ambit of *sthreedharmam* by the 1930s. During the later years, working for the nation and taking a passive part in the Indian Independence movement were added to the duties/activities of women. Therefore, *sthreedharmam* was an adaptive and fluid concept. It was to do more with one's actions than an inner quality. Women's periodicals in colonial Kerala had large numbers of articles describing, teaching, and deliberating on what constituted *sthreedharmam*.

Similarly, *sthreeswathandryam* was a concept that could mean a variety of things in early twentieth-century Kerala. It was used to encompass qualities like self-reliance, ability to deviate from cultural codes of conduct, right to education, ability to break away from caste and community rules, individualism, financial freedom, *et al.* It could also mean developing a nationalist sense of identity. This identity did not clash with the regional identity of the writers.

Connected to *sthreedharmam* and *sthreeswathandryam* was the idea of *sthreethwam*. Roughly translated as femininity, *sthreethwam* embodied qualities categorised as innate to women like kindness, generosity, patience, love, compassion, comportment, and spirituality. Since *sthreethwam* was innate, it was not something that could be taught. Nevertheless, it was believed that the right type of education would enhance a woman's *sthreethwam*. Taking this idea further, it was argued that women could work if they maintained their *sthreethwam* or they could take up jobs that did not compromise their *sthreethwam*. *Sthreethwam* was one important aspect of Malayali women that differentiated them from Western women. There was a seamless blending of concepts like chastity, *sthreethwam*, *sthreedharmam*, and *sthreeswathandryam* with domesticity and the home. In some ways, the discussions enmeshed women more firmly within the domestic sphere while paradoxically taking them out of the physical space of the home.

Since the early twentieth century was a period of transformation, reform, progress, etc., the idea of change was an important area of debate within the magazines. *Parishkaaram* was the term that stood in for civilization, reform, progress, culture, innovation, change, and material development. The idea of *parishkaaram*, like that of chastity, was so important in the first few decades of the twentieth century, there was a textbook from Malabar that had a chapter on this in 1937 (Eshwarapilla 52-64). *Parishkaaram* was taken to be positive or negative based on the context. Any kind of *parishkaaram* that affected culture, lifestyles, *sthreedharmam*, and *sthreethwam* was presented as problematic in the periodicals. The changes wrought in ideas on health and hygiene, scientific innovations, etc. were acceptable. *Parishkaaram* and *adhunikatha* (modernity) were related. Modernity—a literary, social, and political movement that occurred in nineteenth and early twentieth century in Kerala—was perceived as one of the reasons for the arrival of *parishkaaram*.

Minute aspects of women's lives were dissected in the colonial women's magazines—from discussing whether women needed contraception to the need for servants in households. That these periodicals were meant for the middle and upper classes need to be reiterated here. While it is not conceivable for us in the twenty-first century that magazines would discuss whether girls/women need to be taught music and dance, this was indeed a topic of discussion in the early magazines. There was a very real fear that women would lose their femininity, role in the domestic sphere, motherly spirit, morality, and spirituality. It was also assumed that these were qualities inherent in women.

### **Conclusion**

There was a shortage of newsprint towards the beginning of the Second World War. Many of the women's magazines stopped publication towards this period. The nationalist movement had gained momentum by then and the attention of the politically inclined editors and writers among the women was diverted towards this. As mentioned earlier, early women's periodicals can be categorised as falling within the scarce medium stage. The stage after the scarce medium, Jeffrey calls the mass media stage. This started in the 1960s when newspapers began to be mass-produced following changes in the economic, social, and political realm. What this did then was to change the nature of the "economy of printing" (479), with the newspapers depending on various agents from advertisers and newsagents to the State for its smooth functioning. When print media became mass media, it lost its idiosyncrasies which were inherent in the multiple print media scenario. Profitability is what drove print media in this later stage as opposed to the literary, reformatory, emancipatory, and developmental agenda in the scarce media stage. When the economy of printing changed, the focus of women's magazines changed with it. Education and upliftment became secondary to the leading objective of recreation. Further, the language and the essay form used in the magazines changed with the times and changing needs of the time. Early women's magazines and current women's magazines, therefore, appear fairly unrelatable when read from the present. Mainstream magazines in contemporary Kerala are more like lifestyle magazines. The feminist and reformatory elements in the early magazines have detached to form a new genre among women's periodicals. Magazines/journals that take up such issues use the newer media like the internet, catering to a different clientele, and are seen as separate from the popular magazines.



The concepts, writers, and even magazines discussed in this article are neither exhaustive nor an in-depth study of the field. There were differences in how women from different castes, communities, and economic backgrounds approached several issues about women in the periodicals. Further research is needed to bring out a more nuanced and rich history of colonial Malayalam women's periodicals.

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## Shaping of Colonial Bodies: The Ambivalence in the Writings of Early Women's Magazines in Malayalam

Anna K

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**Abstract:** Women's literary writings, particularly the women-centered magazines published in Malayalam – the local vernacular – was critical in shaping the “idea of the modern body” in the making of the colonial subject in Kerala, a coastal, peripheral southwest state in India. These magazines emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century and flourished in the early twentieth century at a time when Kerala was witnessing a constant colonial attempt to tame and regulate colonial, native female bodies. The body, especially its sexual aesthetic and desires, became precarious to the historical project of shaping the modern colonial subject. The discursive public space of these magazines interrogates the colonial reform discourse in the region, which imposed a new gender and sexual order in shaping governable subjects, publicly articulating the social relationships of colonial time and space. Thus, early women's writings in Malayalam acts as a critical tool in decentering colonial dialectics, deconstructing cultural spaces, expressing alterity, and articulating multiplicity towards the decolonization of gender.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** Colonial body, Malayalam, Women's Magazines, Decolonizing gender, colonial modernity

### The Episteme of Colonial Body in the Decline of Matriliney

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler, in a lecture-seminar session titled “Who is Afraid of “Gender”?” as part of Makerere Institute of Social Research's Global Conversations webinar held on the 29<sup>th</sup> of April, 2020, states that gender is neither “a universal theory,” nor “a category” that is continually applicable, and therefore, be understood as “a contested site.” (“Who is Afraid of “Gender”?”).

Colonial bodies have been transformed through practices, meanings, and regulations that have been altered in the historical processes through which asymmetrical categories were created by colonial encounters. A decolonized interpretation of gender would thus mean decolonization of Western, imperialist knowledge production foregrounding modern state, which manifestly grips the concept of gender. The colonial body forms a central element of this analysis to the extent that it forms a metonym questioning the Eurocentric, androcentric, racist, class-conscious bourgeois, heteronormative order of the modern liberal able-state.<sup>2</sup> While the colonial body emerges as a discernible object of control, desire, contempt, fear, and fetishism, there is an ambivalence in the vulnerability of critical consciousness through which theoretical discourse about the colonial body is perceived. In the discursive context of colonial hetero-patriarchal expectations, the colonial body is ambivalently produced in the abjection and erasure of the history of the “Othered” bodies through technologies of colonial governmentality.

The bodies that transgressed the gendered colonial discourse of power accounted for those histories of bodies, which were detached from histories of hetero/homo binary in the gender perception of imperialist sexed bodies.<sup>3</sup> Those “historied bodies” were conceived outside of the hegemonic, heterosexual, and monogamous idea of marriage and family percepts defining the social values for sexed bodies of heterosexual women and men alone (Montrose 6).<sup>4</sup> This implies criticism of “the hegemonic culture, the legal system, and the gender structure” that defines the central epistemic form of the colonial body (Ruvalcaba 2). The gendering of the colonial body, thus, forms an understanding of the *deviant* body as a subject of historical change in the cultural and political realms (2).<sup>5</sup> This paper explores the

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<sup>2</sup> Colonial subjects are unequivocally gendered subjects who have their bodies enforced with a gender configuration that had to strictly comply with the heterosexual binary codes of maleness or femaleness in the gender insertion of normative male and female behaviours. The gender characterization of colonized bodies ensued disturbingly intrusive and invasive practices directed on non-normative, non-procreative, non-heterosexual, and alternate bodies and sexualities in an attempt to control sexuality, desire, and possibility.

<sup>3</sup> Oyèrónké Oyewùmí reads historical processes in the social construction of gender, which render the “social category” of “woman” non-universal. Oyewùmí, illustrating upon the traditional Yoruba society in southwest Nigeria, recounts it was “non-gendered” and that heterosexual, gendered social categories under the colonial gaze were forcefully assigned on the native bodies (“Conceptualizing Gender”).

<sup>4</sup> Decolonization of gender indorses a modern social theory of the body deconstructing the heteronormative discourse of gendered, colonial power that stresses on gender and gendering of native, colonial bodies as empire’s undeniable and concrete tool.

<sup>5</sup> Emphasis added.

inverted relation that characterized the position of women as gendered colonial bodies within the decline of the matrilineal system and the beginning of Malayalam women's magazines in the late-nineteenth-century propagating an idea of "ideal womanhood" in Kerala.

Women's magazines in Malayalam act as local archives accounting for their roles as sites of archival presence refuting any speculation of "conspiracy of silence" (John and Nair 1). Needless to say, these archives, mostly elapsed and seldom retrieved, acknowledge their epistemic limits of archival knowledge in recognizing the conceptual history of the colonial body as a social fact.<sup>6</sup> Reading early women's magazines just as regular magazines offer limited archival hermeneutics in re-orienting the image of the colonial body. They often exhibit an ambivalent incongruity disrupting the "past" as ontological dispossession in the gender performativity of colonial bodies.<sup>7</sup> This ambivalence occurs when "As Carol Gluck and Anna Tsing put it, "words - and world - are made in cosmopolitan and power-laden encounters at multiple scales."" (D. M. Menon 65). Ambivalence in the writings of early women's magazines in Malayalam is fractured in the temporal fissure, which draws from Dilip M. Menon's argument against "the putatively regnant homogeneous, empty time of empire or nation" (66). Menon writes:

I argue that there is an immanent time *in* texts (arising from the conventions and protocols of the form, the predilections of the thinker, and imagined affinities with ideas coming from other times and places) and the historical time *of* the text. These two "presents" ceaselessly intersect: "one of which is endlessly arriving and the other is already established," as Gilles Deleuze puts it. (66)

Therefore, the textual reckoning of the category of the colonial body in these magazines unveil several epistemic registers of "one regime of historicity and one set of protocols [that] were instituted by the transfer of the Enlightenment project, which then rendered the history of the colony in terms of categories derived from European historical experience" (D. M.

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<sup>6</sup> Anjali Arondekar has reflected upon the hostile margin of theoretical interpretations of the "absence" of the archive and the "archival desire" itself (6).

<sup>7</sup> In articulating the gendered body as performative, Judith Butler affirms the "materiality of the body's sex" through a "forcible reiteration of norms" ("Bodies That Matter" 2). Butler theorized on the performance in the construction and disposition of gender as a form of social and cultural interaction ("Performative Acts and Gender Constitution").

Menon 66). The contributions of these magazines in crafting gendered social categories thus evinces the process of what Haydée Bangerezako calls “indirect writing” where the writing of the colonized elite “adapted to the historical narratives pushed forth” by the colonizer suiting the interest of native elite men (12-14). Hence, “Treating texts as porous rather than hermetic allows us to move beyond the idea of “tradition” and “canon” to apprehend the uncanny affinities, improbable genealogies, and deep time present in the act of historical reflection,” which is significant to reading these magazines (D.M. Menon 65).

The historical project of shaping the “idea of the modern body” in the making of the colonial subject in Kerala commenced with a series of subtle moves to dismantle matrilineal households as a social structure in this region since the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> The modern body or the colonial body is a mutable concept. In the nineteenth century, nearly fifty percent of the “Malayali population, of different castes and communities, were matrilineal (N. Menon, “Sexualities” xx).”<sup>9</sup> The idea of communal property, polyandrous relationships, and matrilineal descent was considered the stagnation of a savaged past, and the patrilineal monogamous marriage assumed the character of progress defined in the exertion of control on both sexuality and fertility of native women. The “idea of the modern body” is thus constructed through the imperialist narratives of the “Other” critically inquiring the historical conjecture between colonial modernity and the gendering of colonial bodies. It evolved in Kerala in a constant colonial attempt to tame and obliterate its constitutive “Other” – history of diverse non-heteronormative imaginations of the body and excess of women’s sexuality within the history of matrilineal family kinship. The shaping of the Malayalee populace under colonial modernity signalled towards attempts to “reform the customary practices and hierarchies of particular castes” to shape “modern communities (Jeffrey, “Decline of Nair Dominance”).

The body, especially its sexual aesthetic, became precarious to the reform project of shaping the modern body/colonial subject or the “ideal woman” and “ideal man” (Devika, “The Aesthetic Woman” 460). J. Devika contends “that the formation of modern gender identities in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Kerala was deeply implicated in the project of

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<sup>8</sup> Throughout this paper, “modern body,” “colonial body” and “modern colonial body” are alternatively used to refer to the same heteronormative idea of the body which emerged historically since the nineteenth century in colonial India.

<sup>9</sup> Malayali or Malayalee/Malayalees are ethno-linguistic group of people residing in the state of Kerala in India speaking the language Malayalam.

shaping governable subjects who were, at the one and same time, 'free' and already inserted into modern institutions" (460). This facilitated recasting matriliney in order to construct the patrilocal family as the base unit for the society of Kerala to enter into modernity. Between 1869 and 1896, the colonial state legally instituted monogamous marriage by instilling responsibility of the family on the man at the behest of native elite upper-caste Hindu men (Devika 523).<sup>10</sup> In the aftermath of Queen Victoria's Proclamation of 1858 on India that fetched an indirect governing system in the Indian subcontinent, the Madras High Court in 1869 declared its judicial interpretation of the customary marriage within the matrilineal kinship groups of Nair<sup>11</sup> woman as "state of concubinage and is at liberty when and as often as she pleases (Awaya 293)."<sup>12</sup> It was a direct colonial intervention encumbering woman's sexual freedom informed by Henry Summer Maine's Patriarchal theory, which detailed the legal understanding of the matrilineal family.<sup>13</sup>

The legal and institutional mechanisms of colonial governance did shape the shifting identity dialectic of women in Kerala.<sup>14</sup> In this regard, the ambiguities of liberation for Malayalee women, and not their simple inclusion in the social modernization project, are now more recognized as characteristic of Malayalee modernity (Devika, "Rethinking 'Region'" 259). The enactment of the Malabar Marriage Act in 1896 was considered to be the first and most important step in the direction of abolishing all non-monogamous, non-normative

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<sup>10</sup> See Robin Jeffrey, *Decline of Nair Dominance*.

<sup>11</sup> In the archetype of Indian caste structure, Nair/Nairs are supposedly Sudras, lowest in the caste hierarchy, but unlike the rest of India, there is considerable fluidity to Nair caste identity. To refer to Robin Jeffrey, they are ("Decline of Nair Dominance" 13):

The lords of the country, guardians of the public wealth; they wielded the distinctive privileges of the Kshatriya...these distinctive privileges...added their close bond of union with the Nambuthiri Brahmin...point to their unmistakeable pre-eminence.

Jeffrey further states that Nairs weren't egalitarian and consisted of many sub-castes or lineages: those of 'royalty', of local chiefs, of the village headman, or of 'commoners' who acted as retainers of the first three or of Nambuthiri Brahmins ("Decline of Nair Dominance" 13-14).

<sup>12</sup> See Mahmood Mamdani, *Define and Rule*.

<sup>13</sup> According to Praveena Kodoth, Henry Maine's work "which set up a comparative legal perspective on evolution using Roman, Greek and Hindu law" in the nineteenth century "made it possible to move easily between Roman and Hindu law and to interpret matrilineal families in terms of the patrilineal (whether Roman or Hindu) i.e., as the archaic form of the patriarchal family in a linear evolutionist theory of society. From this it became possible to identify with the matrilineal family characteristics associated with the patriarchal family in its archaic form and matrilineal customs was interpreted in analogy with more familiar customs of patrilineal and patriarchal societies – both western and 'Hindu' – albeit of another time" ("Framing Custom, Directing Practices" 8).

<sup>14</sup> Mahmood Mamdani in his work historicizes the political legacy of colonialism in the complexity of legal institutions of the colonial state in its construction of different political identities ("Citizen and Subject").



conjugal relationships in the region. It was an event that occurred amidst a Western liberal discourse of progress, freedom, and individual identity. The introduction of the act led to an “epistemic shift” that marked “a pivotal change” where the sexual practices of Nair women became “a primary object of knowledge for the British colonial state” (Mitra 98).

Under the colonial regime, conceptual articulations by the local male, upper caste intelligentsia of notions of sexual morality not only embraced the colonizer’s perceptions of civilizing mission through disciplining the body but also popularized it as an essential component of a progressive modern society.<sup>15</sup> Hence, the matrilineal family structure in Kerala as one of the multiple sites of colonial gaze on female bodies unravel the polemic edge into understanding the gendered categories of Eurocentric and imperialist knowledge production. This remoteness or seclusion of the body and sexuality of the “Other” reflects Edward Said’s observation of “epistemological difficulty” in the gendered distinction between “man” and “woman,” which translated itself into a sexual exchange between the “domestic” body of the woman and the “public” body of the man (Said 189; Devika, “The Aesthetic Woman” 460).

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the colonial denunciation of Indians as “degenerate and barbaric” body had become an irrefutable fact for the emerging modern educated Malayalee population, especially the elite, upper-caste, bourgeoisie, male populace like in other parts of India (Chatterjee, “Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonialized Women” 622). The privileged group in Kerala includes sections of the Nair caste in Kerala who had gained early access to modern ideas, education, and colonial institutions. They responded fiercely through extensive publications in the print media.<sup>16</sup> In addition to merely interpreting the Victorian moral values, this space of Malayalam writing and publication in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Kerala offered to reform the moral constituency of

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<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault states that there was a propagation of disciplinary regimes in relation to sexuality in the West manifested in intensification in the management and policing of sexuality in the modern period, leading to distinctions of bourgeois identity. Similar conditions in the non-West have been the consequence of colonial capitalist interests (1978; 24-5, 145-6.)

<sup>16</sup> Rajeev Kumaramkandath in his observations of the early modern Kerala public sphere “included only a few English educated local elites and left out the masses who never had an opportunity to go to English schools”, departs from Jürgen Habermas’s “universal access principle” to Sean Cubitt’s claim that “public sphere has always existed only in terms of excluding many groups including the poor, women and so on” (Cubitt 2005, 93).” Kumaramkandath asserts that the views propagated through the magazines belonged to a “handful of elites and they captured the wider imagination of the society very soon and in the subsequent periods. Their significance remains in the fact that they laid the foundation for addressing issues concerned with modernity” (119).

both the body and the individual of the colonial subject to attain “modern” and “progressive” ethics and ideals.

This modern redefinition can be discerned in the sexual imageries of a fetishized ideal womanhood that began to emerge in modern Malayalam literature and literary publications. Such works which began around the latter half of the nineteenth century in Kerala were repositories of Victorian moral troupes on self, body, society, and progress, which began to concretize “public sphere” (Devika, “Negotiating Women’s Social Space” 45). This was furthered through journals brought out by the missionaries, and later through other newspapers and magazines, claiming to articulate the “public interest” (Devika and Sukumar 4471). The interests of the imperial governance did ensure that publications of women writers were banned as “objectionable” if they were believed to “endanger the moral health of their Indian subjects” (Tharu and Lalita, “Women Writing in India” 4). The emergent institution of the “public space” perpetuated the colonial idea and ideal of the female body. The distinction between feminized “domestic” and masculine “public” was found at the alignment of a relationship between order and disorder that shaped the colonial bodies in Kerala within the heterosexual, gendered binary codes of maleness/femaleness, deviancy/respectability, tradition/modernity, and primitive/progressive.

### **Textual Ambivalence of Colonial Body in Early Women’s Magazines**

Thirty years after the mutiny of 1857, at the cusp of colonial modernity, in 1892 began the publication of the first women’s magazine in Malayalam, *Keraleeya Sugunabodhini* (Devika, “Negotiating Women’s Social Space” 45). J. Devika emphasizes on this magazine’s clearly stated stand on delineating public/domestic notion of social domains in its very first issue, “which proclaimed that politics and narrow argumentation about religion would be strictly avoided (Raghavan 1985: 141)” (45). *Keraleeya Sugunabodhini* (1892), affirmed this at the outset:

We will publish nothing related to politics. Principles of physiology, entertaining tales, writings that energise the moral conscience, stories, Womanly Duty, the science of cookery, biographies of ideal women, the history of nations, book-reviews and other such enlightening topics will be published... (Raghavan 1985: 141). (Devika and Thampi, “New Lamps for Old?” 142).

Thus, as far as the modern educated new elites “in late 19th century Malayalee society was concerned, ‘politics’ was delineated, early enough, as a terrain unfit for women, in early discourses on modern gender ideals in Kerala” (Devika and Thampi 147). Although *Keraleeya Sugunabodhini* was short lived, a range of women’s magazines including *Sarada* (1904), *Lakshmi Bai* (1906), *Bhasha Sarada* (1914), *Mahila Ratnam* (1914), *Sumangala* (1915), *Sahodari* (1925), *Christava Mahilamani* (1920), *Mahila* (1921), *Vanitha Kusumam* (1926), *Muslim Vanitha*, *Sreemathi*, *Sthree* (1933) and others emerged.<sup>17</sup> Often, the titles of these magazines are quintessentially “coterminous with the notion of the ideal woman” (Vinayan and Raj 401). They largely identified as their reader the woman seeking advice about transforming herself in the shape of the ideal womanly self, ensconced in the modern domestic domain (Devika and Sukumar 4472). These magazines seem to reckon with an almost ambivalent autobiographical voice with the magazines reflecting upon the intertextual commentary flexing the structure to echo their life processes to establish continuity. It is as if the disruption of colonial encounter is nearly expunged by the ambivalence in their writings compelled by the necessity to have a sense of continuation to serve a kind of imagined community of “nation,” as Benedict Anderson would propose.

These magazines reinforced the colonial composition of social categories of monogamous marriage, cohabitation, deviancy, concubinage, and prostitution, which indirectly slipped into normative contestations about cultural alterity lodged in the gendered bodies of colonial subjects. They reflect upon the lively debates on “subjects such as changing conceptions of the institutions of marriage and family, and the changing roles for women as mothers and housewives” (Vinayan and Raj 401). In an article titled “Modern Motherhood” published in *Mahila* (meaning “women” in Malayalam), the unnamed author claims that men and women have different and disparate responsibilities in life, and women should not expect to be able to “think” like men.<sup>18</sup> It is not a woman’s duty to aspire to have the qualifications of a man but to heal and guard the Man’s World with certain freedom concerning reproductive rights (“Modern Motherhood”). The impression of freedom in this article is defined within an ontological space of “possessing the self-means for survival” within regulated norms of a Western liberal frame of gendered hierarchy (Devika, “En-gendering

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<sup>17</sup> See Sruthi Vinayan & Merin Simi Raj 401, K. Pradeep, March 18, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Translation/paraphrasing from Malayalam to English by the author.

Individuals” 118). Moreover, like education, this freedom is expected to equip women to “conform to ideal subjectivities as Man and Woman” (Devika, “En-gendering Individuals” 119).

Mainly emblematic of self-discipline in compliance with the imperial codes of gendered body and sexuality, there has been an effort at mimicking the White Victorian “ladies” in these magazines. These magazines regularly published articles on women from foreign countries like the United Kingdom, France, and Japan indicating a strong partial leaning and interest in the lives of women of colonizing countries. For example, M. Chellamma in 1915 showered praises on Queen Mary of the United Kingdom for her efforts to support her country and the dominion during the First World War. The manufacturing of this new class-based respectability in Kerala was a path-breaking entry to colonial modernity. The social respectability of women from the emerging middle-classes was being “defined in counterpoint to the “crude and licentious” behavior of lower-class women” (Tharu and Lalita 8). This manifestly recognized a class differentiation on the basis of “sexual mores for women” in accordance with the emergence of “new bourgeoisie,” which inscribed its identity “on the bodies and souls of women” to churn the proper lady through regulations of sexual morality in Indian society (8).

Typically, heterosexual women of the so-called respectable monogamous marital relations, bourgeois, upper class, and upper caste embodied what characterized a nation. The other groups of female colonial bodies outside of those categories were the deviant bodies excluded, marginalized from the idea of womanhood that is predicated on the modern state. Therefore, it is in the lived experiences of those erased bodies that postcolonial and subaltern scholarships fetched their instruments of knowledge to dispute and dissent with the Western universal notion of gender. Women belonging to the elite Nair caste seem to assume a position of leadership amongst the Malayali woman, as contributors to early women’s magazines. Most of the writers for magazines like “*Sharada*, *Lakshmibai*, *Mahilamandiram*, *M.N. Nair Masika*, and *Mahila* were upper and middle caste Hindus. However, other magazines like *Vanitha Kusumam*, *Bashaposhini*, *Sadhguru*, *Gurunathan*, *Maryrani*, *Mathrubhumi*, etc. had Christian writers too” (Antony, “Women’s Education” 21). *Vanitha Kusumam* was radical in its views when compared to magazines that had exclusively Hindu writers. In their articles, they refer to themselves as Malayali women, while “women from

other caste/religious groups are addressed or tagged using their religion or caste” (21).

Although uncontested, this appears to indicate that the modernity of Malayali women is represented by Nair modernity (21). The upper caste, educated, Nair reformers did initiate a language that acted as a centripetal force in crafting the collective social ethos in the capitalist inventory of a newly emerging Malayali identity where caste has been rearticulated as a community in the caste reform movements (Antony, “Women’s Education Debates in Kerala” 37). There was an “emergence of a hegemonic image of the “ideal Malayali woman” strongly influenced by the caste markings and customs of Nair women” (Antony, “Women’s Education” 21). While most of the women contributors were educated, it was riveting to note a few identified themselves as wives, using the prefix —Mrs. This was an emerging trend of the time, as women of the matrilineal kinship groups were not used to identifying themselves with their husband’s name or family (Antony, “Women’s Education Debates in Kerala” 30).

The demarcation of space in the writing of these magazines was not only ambivalently made through the choice of content but in the very choice of identity chosen by women appropriating the social evolution of “ideal Malayali woman”. In one of the editions of *Lakshmi Bai* in 1914, V. Narayani Amma in her article titled “Certain Practices of Women in Kerala” advises and reminds women of their wifely duties, which is to be responsible for controlling the domestic/household expenses to support their husbands who work hard to provide for their families.<sup>19</sup> J. Devika concisely states, “women’s magazines defined for women [...] the domain of modern domesticity” (Devika, “Negotiating Women’s Social Space” 45). This certainly accounted for indirect writing wherein Judith Butler’s concept of “repetition” gains visibility, as these magazines allowed for an ambivalent reading of gender as socially imposed or discursive code that is responded to and performed (Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution”).

Modern education was at the core of crafting the “ideal Malayali woman” in the women’s magazines. According to Teena Antony, “Of around 460 articles collected from various magazines published in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, 80 were specifically on education and most of the other articles more or less referred to women’s education in some capacity” (Antony, “Women’s Education” 35). It was asserted that the absolute commitment of modern education was “the development of a self with a focus on *interiority* – both in the sense of a

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<sup>19</sup> Translation/paraphrasing from Malayalam to English by the author.

supposed inner-space that pre-exists any education, and in the sense of the act of looking inwards” (Devika, “Negotiating Women’s Social Space” 46). Then prevailing understanding was that colonial state-supported education and education sponsored by missionaries were essential to “nurture their innate “womanly” qualities” to perform their roles and duties as wives and mothers within their domestic sphere – “ideas suggestive of the patriarchal underpinnings of the imagining of the “new woman” by the nationalist reform movement, as explicated by Partha Chatterjee (1989)” (Vinayan and Raj 404).<sup>20</sup>

To an extent, early feminists in Kerala have felt compelled to dislodge some of these homogenizing female identities publicized in these magazines. This includes, for instance, the writings of first-generation Malayalee feminists like Anna Chandy, Parvati Nenminimangalam, and Kochattil Kalyanikutty Amma who published their articles in magazines like the *Mahila*, which tried to attain a balance between critique and pedagogy by blurring the gap between the domestic and the public (Devika and Sukumar 4473). Under the title of “Today’s Women,” the article in *Sumangala*, 1916, urged women to break free from the shackles of being a “securely domesticated ... fragile object of men’s desire” to “empower themselves to complete the world which they occupy” (“Today’s Women”).<sup>21</sup> Likewise, in *Lakshmi Bai*, 1905, P. Kavamma warns fellow women of the respectable men in society who are responsible for not just committing violence on female bodies but also projecting women as “deviant,” “unqualified” and “selfish” beings.<sup>22</sup>

These articles firmly contested the social norm that considered women whose behaviour did not conform to the sexual complementarity of gender difference to be denied any “Womanly power” in society (Devika, “Negotiating Women’s Social Space” 51). The “Womanly power” was recognized in the “innate talent” of women for compassion, patience, and tolerance, and their experience as married women, which were perceived as necessary

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<sup>20</sup> J. Devika contends that Partha Chatterjee’s argument claims “the nationalist ‘protection’ of the domestic domain as a sacred ‘inner-space’ outside the purview of the modern state (Chatterjee 1989: 233–249)” is not relevant in understanding Malayalee society of the early-twentieth-century. Devika argues that “in Kerala...it was precisely at this time that the state was called upon to legislate in order to transform the ‘inner-most’ social spaces, those of marriage and family, by community [reform] movements whose major agenda was the transformation of internally-heterogeneous, loosely-structured pre-modern caste groups into internally homogeneous, strongly bound and mutually exclusive modern communities” (“Negotiating women’s social space” 46).

<sup>21</sup> Translation/paraphrasing from Malayalam to English by the author.

<sup>22</sup> Translation/paraphrasing from Malayalam to English by the author.

qualifications for women to seek employment in public institutions (51). According to Robin Jeffrey, with the dismantling of matriliney, “matrilineal women lost at least as much as they gained” (Jeffrey, “Matriliney, Women, Development” 373-376). While they “lost a measure of sexual independence as well as a guaranteed, lifelong place in their family home,” they were able to acquire positions of salaried employment in public institutions during the “transition from matriliney to patriliney” (373-376).

This provokes a theorization within Durba Mitra’s concept of “epistemic doubling,” wherein women’s magazines in Kerala emerged as ambivalent by-products of the colonial heteropatriarchal capitalist register to parade the colonial troupe of civilizing the debased native female bodies condemned by the violence of native men (134). If the West is understood to have been built on the erasure of its premodern history and defined as the antithesis to the “Other,” then decolonization of gender, in this case, is compelled by the universalism of Western Enlightenment defining West/non-West (Raghuramaraju, “Rethinking the West”). This is echoed in the single, universalized understanding of the term “emancipation,” which the colonial administrators perceived to have achieved with respect to the women in Kerala in providing them with education and bestowing them with a publishing platform to voice their thoughts, views, and contestations in exclusive vernacular magazines.

At the same, the emerging space of women’s writings and their publications was ambivalently gendered as women were assigned women’s only magazines to express their thoughts and views away from/outside the mainstream, public space denied to non-male, non-heterosexual, non-upper caste bodies. Therefore, an angular reading of colonial modernity, thus, reflects on Nivedita Menon’s argument that modernity has not been “unambiguously emancipatory” and it has “eradicated spaces of relative autonomy and produced new forms of subjection” (“Sexualities” xvi). Further deployment of “epistemic doubling” reflects on the content of these magazines that was patently sanitized by the gendered moral codes envisaged within the arc of colonial modernity, which obsessively attempted to equate all forms of sexual desires into forms of sexual deviance. Although there were attempts by women to utilize the space to resist gendered disciplinary regimes of colonial modernity, there were few attempts to dismantle the social articulation of “indirect writing” accumulated on racist, casteist, and ethnicity- and class-based gendered hierarchies.

## Conclusion

Undeniably, the publication of women's magazines re-centers the role of knowledge production in the making of colonial governmentality of power etched on the gendered colonial bodies in Kerala. Embedded within a social history of colonial or modern body, these early women's magazines were ambivalent in their inquiry upon the shifting frames of time and space in the decolonizing of gender. These magazines were informed by the imperialist project of knowledge production to produce a heteronormative idea of "modern colonial body" advancing the gender construction marked an erasure of bodies and their histories. An attempt to historicize the colonial origins of the modern body in Kerala engages with hermeneutical forms of loss and historical recovery of a past exhibited in the ambivalence of Malayalam women's magazines of late nineteenth-century literature and early twentieth-century. Therefore, conditions of historical knowledge in the spatial forms of translation, objectification, and categorization have produced the modern/colonial body as a social fact with the conceptual history that transcends fixed social categories

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## The Woman's Question: Negotiating Modernity in Early Twentieth-Century Women's Magazines in Malayalam

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### Abstract:

Women's questions can be defined as discourses within larger movements that focus on improving the women's condition and status in society articulated not in partnership with or by women in question but by others who speak for them. The woman's question was of particular importance in colonial Kerala attempting to 'modernise' itself. And many of the debates and discussions contained in women's magazines in Malayalam in the first half of the twentieth century reflect the centrality of 'woman' in the contemporary discourses of reform and nationalism. These magazines were vehicles for the dissemination of ideas and reveal how women in particular mediated the binaries of home/world, tradition/modernity, spiritual/material binaries. The cultural anxieties of a changing society led to women being assigned and defined as constituting the home/tradition/spiritual. However, many of the articles analysed reveal the way in which women of the time critiqued and mediated the cultural anxieties and limitations that marked women's role and rights within the larger discourses of reform and nationalism.

**Keywords:** Early women's magazines in Malayalam, woman's question, home/world binary, early modern Kerala, women's voices

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In colonial India, women were often the torch bearers of the community and national honour and as a result, discourses of reform and nationalism were often played out on the bodies of women of the communities. In a speech, Ayyankali, a prominent social reformer from Pulaya community persuaded the Pulaya women to throw away their bead necklaces that were the badge of the slave community, as well as to cover their breasts with an upper cloth in defiance of the caste regulations. Mala Khullar in her introduction to *Writing the Women's Movement* notes:

This was a period during which campaigns for societal reforms were undertaken and issues relating to women were tackled within a broader agenda for change. While these movements were not homogenous, they did have a common concern for rooting out certain practices, so-called ‘social evils’ or undesirable cultural practices such as widow immolation (sati), discrimination against widows and child marriage, partly in response to charges of barbarity and lack of civilisation from the colonial rulers. On one hand, Indian men were preoccupied with western ideas – seeking to emulate, assimilate or reject these – and on the other, they wished to incorporate revivalist elements by reassertion and reinforcement of a cultural identity distinct from that of the British rulers. (2)

However, in speaking for women, a characteristic of such discourses, the women’s voices run the risk of erasure. Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak illustrates this in “Can the Subaltern Speak.” According to her, in the discourse of sati, the women’s voices are unheard. It is not that women do not speak but they are either ‘misheard’ or erased from the discussion. Maitreyee Chaudhuri argues that “women actually appeared in this public discussion more as a symbol of the moral health of the ‘tradition’ itself, as this was debated among male colonial officials and Indian reformists, nationalists, and conservatives to exclude, largely the views and voices of women themselves” (80).

A woman is a concept through which issues of space, culture, identity, community, and honour are represented and negotiated. In the discourse of nationalism, the binary of the material, and spiritual (that was referenced to express the binary of the coloniser and the colonised) was compounded into other binaries – the external (the material) and the internal (the spiritual), man (the public) and woman (the private/domestic): “The world is the external and the domain of the material; the home represents our inner spirit, our true identity... The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world – and woman is its representation.” (Chatterjee, “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question” 238-39).

A woman’s question can be defined as a focus on improving the women’s condition and status in society through ending customs that cause suffering, humiliation, and restricts their freedom. But they are articulated not in partnership with or by the women in question but by men who spoke for them. “Despite the many pronouncements of good intent by the male leaders, however, most of them still saw a woman’s role basically as that of a housewife within a

conservative family structure” (Jayawardena 99). For the British, the treatment of women frequently served as a cultural yardstick by which they reinforced the inferiority of the colonised cultures and practices. Seen in this light, the attempts to uplift women were partly driven by the need to ‘civilize’ society. The women’s issues addressed within larger discourses of reform, nationalism, and conservatism cannot all be considered feminist since in many instances the woman’s question leads to consolidation and institutionalisation of new patriarchy or continuation of old patriarchal practices. For example, the new ‘modern’ woman of early twentieth-century colonial Bengal was defined against the western woman and/or the common woman. The common woman was defined as “coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous” and therefore necessitating the violent suppression by the male (Chatterjee, “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question” 244).

It was no different in colonial Kerala. J Devika notes in *En-Gendering Individuals: The Language of Re-Forming in Twentieth-Century Keralam* (hereafter *EI*),

Along with nationalism, community reform efforts and community politics, and early socialist and trade union assertions, the 1930s also saw the articulation of demands made upon the government on behalf of ‘women’ as a group for job reservations, representation in political bodies etc. These decades saw the spread of modern domesticity and the conjugal family; earlier modes of domestic life and marriage came under increasing threat due to legislative interventions and economic change, and as new ideas regarding civilised and moral family life and personal freedom gained greater velocity of circulation. (12)

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were times of significant change in Kerala. The various reform movements that were in turn responses to the changing political and economic scenario of the time, resulted in social and cultural change. The British colonial presence and their increasing power and influence led to the fashioning of what is often termed the ‘modern’ period in the history of Kerala. This resulted in changes to traditional social arrangements, hierarchies, and practices, particularly with regard to caste. Devika mentions that early modern Kerala re-envisaged its ‘jati’ centred view of community grounded on “external determinants like birth or inherited social authority” into a “liberal vision of a society of equal individuals” valued for their “inherent, internal qualities,” that was based on the sexual character of one’s body” (15 - 16).

During the modernisation of Kerala society, “women were integrated into it largely as subjects of a certain Womanliness ... modernity did not abolish female domesticity. If it did away with traditional family arrangements, it also instituted new forms of family and female domesticity” (Devika, *EI* 18). Devika notes the patriarchal nature and limitations of the new woman in colonial Kerala evident in the heroines of late nineteenth Malayalam novels who are “characterised by their strong internalities, developed through suitable training” (*EI* 45). So while on one hand women were given agency, this period was also one of gendering and institution of new patriarchies. “With its focus upon the internal and naturally given, and its recognition of sex as foundational, individualism in Keralam logically entailed a perspective of gender-difference. But this difference was at once organised through the projection of the Man-Woman relationship as a complementary, power-free one” (Devika, *EI* 49).

Therefore, gender emerges as a crucial concept for identifying and classifying citizens, spaces and roles, and responsibilities. And those practices and institutions that did not fit into this ‘modernity’ were termed deviant and abnormal and ‘reformed.’ This is evident in the outlawing of matriliney and *sambandam* during this time. Until the nineteenth century, the matrilineal model went unchallenged. A custom that was initially prevalent amongst the Nairs and extended over time to Mappilas, Ezhavas, and Tiyyas, it appalled the European missionaries. Robin Jeffrey notes that Hindus from other parts of India tittered at the “looseness of the prevailing morals,” and the state of “all but promiscuous intercourse” (25). Instead, the model of the modern nuclear family was projected as the ideal. K Saradmoni notes that Kerala aspiring toward modernity and modernisation, especially in the realm of marriage and family, began to view matriliney as an abnormality (10-12). Reform in some cases manifested itself in accepting new notions of marriage and family that were even more patriarchal and therefore more acceptable. As a result of the move toward modernisation,

the state was virtually welcomed to legislate upon such intimate matters as marriage, to enable the reconstitution of the ‘inner domain’ in a form that appeared the most civilised ... Within them, whole sets of practices, some restrictive and others positive, were recommended as aids to develop these given gendered capacities ... more powerful were practices of the more positive type which ranged from elaborate schemes like female education that integrated several minor practices and were ensconced within new institutions like modern schools, streesamajams

(women's associations) etc., to relatively simple schemes like wearing a blouse, a ravukka (Devika, *EI* 28).

It is in this period of bifurcation and reconstitution that the first women's magazines in Malayalam emerge, shaped by and evolved from this popular notion of the Man-Woman relationship as contractual and complementary. The first magazine dedicated exclusively to women, *Keralasugunabodhini* is generally believed to have been edited by an all-male editorial team and contained mostly contributions by male writers (Priyadarshan 14). *Sarada* was the first women's magazine to have a woman editor. Later women's magazines like *Lakshmi Bai*, *Mahila Ratnam*, *Mahila*, *Mangalodayam*, and *Mahila Mandiram* also had mostly women as contributors and editorial team members.

Women's magazines of the time were important mediums for the dissemination of ideas especially to women and acted as means of social conditioning by propagating and reinforcing norms and ideals. This is evident from the range of topics found in these magazines – from beauty and health to features on prominent women of the time and articles of issues of marriage, family, femininity, dowry, female education, history as well as poetry, and fiction.

As per the dominant view of social relationships ordered along lines of gender, women were responsible for “domestic life, familial relationships and the emotional environment attached to them, while Man must locate himself in competitive activities pertaining to the public domain” (Devika, *EI* 45). However, the presence of many educated women advocating women's rights and freedom in the first half of the twentieth century, led to increasing challenges to this notion of ‘complementary sexual exchange.’

Indeed throughout the 20s and 30s, one comes across persistent complaints that they went against the spirit of complementary sexual exchange and were detrimental to the creation of ideal modern society ... The complaint that Western-style education eroded women's ‘natural’ qualities and that ... women are turning wanton and disobedient in their imitation of the west’ – had begun to be heard since the turn-of-the century, but now it came to be linked to modern educated women's aspirations regarding entry into public domain.” (Devika, *EI* 138).

This is what makes the study of these women's magazines important. While many of the articles in these magazines do not challenge the new forms of patriarchy, they also contain



critiques and perspectives that subtly undermine and transgress the complementary nature of man-woman roles in society. When studied against the backdrop of the larger discourses of reform and modernity, they reveal the negotiated positions of the women and their claims to agency and freedom that they were excluded from. They contain women's reactions and responses to the 'woman's question' that was central to the formation of modernity and community during the time. Some of the articles articulate views considered as early feminism, negotiating the binaries of the public/private, man/woman, and home/world.

The "Prasthavana (Editorial)" of the first-anniversary issue of *Sarada* states, "We are proud to proclaim that many women who out of excessive humility were under the belief that they could not write, have entered into the field of literature through our encouragement and support. Women through the writings of articles are working towards their own reform" (1). Women writers according to Gilbert and Gubar, suffer from anxiety of authorship. Likewise, Susie Tharu and K Lalitha in their Introduction to *Women Writing in India* have illustrated the policing and silencing of women's writing in India. Therefore, the editorial's claim that the magazine acts as a space for women to express their opinions as well as encourage literary efforts amongst women becomes significant. The magazines therefore can be seen as a space for self-representation in the woman's question.

They become spaces of dialogue, where different perspectives and views on the woman's question are expressed – by both men and women. There are many instances of responses to and refutations of views deemed inappropriate and controversial within these magazines. Anna Chandy in "On Women's Liberation" attacks the double standards of the reform movements on the issue of women's education and its patriarchal attitudes – though they wish society and the position of women to change, they are still patriarchal in their demand that women should be given a 'modern' education so that they can become suitable companions to 'modern' men. She is also critical of nationalist "veneration of women as deities" which "condemns her to tragic suffering" when they are reduced to "Empresses of the Home" of "Sanctified Goddesses" (15). In "The Craze for Imitation" by C P Kalyani Amma, she refutes an earlier article by a prominent intellectual Puttezhattu Raman Menon that attacks 'modern minded young women as chief perpetrators of a shallow and superficial modernity':

Western women, Tamil women or Parsi women ... do not dazzle us ... On the whole, Mr. Menon's article reminds one of the thrashings meted out by some old

*karanavanmar*. They thrash others for good reasons and for bad reasons. Very often the whipping would be for ‘telling the truth’ ... we ascribe no value at all for Mr. Menon’s article which has been written with the sole purpose of nagging us.” (9)

Mr. Menon is constructed here as the figure of male authority attempting to dominate and silence women’s desires and voices – the ‘we’, according to what ‘he’ finds acceptable. The final statement of rejection can be interpreted as a rejection of the attempt to speak on behalf of women.

One of the most popular topics of the time seems to be women’s education. Modern education was seen as a major reason for the changes across the economic, social and cultural spectrum. It was perceived as instrumental in breaking down existing systems of domination and to bringing about agency and upliftment. In his article “Malayala Streekalum Vidhyabhyasavum,” K Vasudevan Musthi speaks of a modern education for women that imparts knowledge of “history, poetry, drama and grammar in Malayalam as well as basic knowledge of English and Sanskrit” (3). This he argues, can contribute to the development of qualities such as common sense amongst women. His view and intention of woman’s education mirrors the idea of middle-class women’s education in England of the nineteenth century – to create able and refined women with the requisite skills to assist and enable her husband, to manage the home and children. Musthi’s view seems to be echoed by others who perceive women’s education as part of the process of modernisation of society in general. Often the women of Europe and America are presented as examples of what education and modernity can contribute to women’s rights and national progress: “In countries like Europe and America, women are educated like the men and in all aspects of life they both have equal amount of freedom and we can see that those countries have attained prosperity and progress” (C. Rukmini Amma 6). Rukmini Amma’s argument differs subtly from Vasudevan Musthi’s. For her, the education of women should have the same intention and focus as men and must translate into freedom and rights for women.

It is not only to the West that these writers turn to in order to find arguments and examples to support the cause of women’s education. N A Amma draws on pre-colonial India to justify the education of women: “A Woman scholar made it possible for the author of *Sakuntalam* to assume the name of Kalidasa ... Therefore it is proven that there were women scholars in ancient times” (1). Not only is education presented as a mark and need of progress but as

sanctioned by pre-colonial practices. These arguments assert the fact that women's education is 'necessary' as well as 'normal.' By aligning it with progress, rights, and freedom, these writers affirm its necessity for women and modern Kerala. At the same time, by evoking examples of women scholars from ancient Indian texts and legends, they assuage the cultural anxiety that marks the 'woman' in colonial India. Education for women, in their arguments, is historically acceptable and even endorsed in the 'glorious' ancient pasts of the nation and through this, they refute the anxieties against providing women with an education that is considered as 'modern'.

In "Malayalikalum Stree Vidhyabhyasavum (Malayalees and Women's Education)" K Padmavathy Amma rejects attempts that she considers mere lip service to the cause of women's education.

Reform is not complete if one lets one's daughters complete primary school education. This is just a sign of modernity and one should not be satisfied by such small moves. Any reform that is external and does not significantly change our attitudes and beliefs is ineffectual. Right now, we don't want education that would enable us to become lawyers or barristers like men. And we have not reached the state for such aspirations as yet. Only after sitting should one stretch one's legs. However, at this stage it is necessary for women to acquire at least enough education to raise themselves from their present state of ignorance and to enlighten them on duties as wives and mothers. (7)

The varying positions and justifications in these texts illustrate the different strategies and arguments used to present the need for women's education. The language and logic often conform to and reiterate existing patriarchal beliefs about women's education. While being conciliatory to the modern patriarchy, some like K Padmavathy Amma's article reveal the ultimate ambition for women's education – the entry into the public space and potential for economic independence and power.

In "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question" Partha Chatterjee identifies in colonial Bengal of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the existence of two seemingly oppositional forces – modernity and nationalism. Reform movements were the consequence of the influence and internalisation of western ideas. However, as the nationalist discourse gained widespread popularity, the aping of western customs and manners became

something that was derided. “The new politics of nationalism ‘glorified India’s past and tended to defend everything traditional;’ all attempts to change customs and lifestyles began to be seen as the aping of western manners and thereby regarded with suspicion” (234). In the nationalist discourse of the time, there is, on one hand, a desire for modernity (especially the advantages that education and technology could bring) and on the other the anxiety of moral corruption and cultural loss it could entail. “But in the entire phase of the nationalist struggle, the crucial need was to protect, preserve and strengthen the inner core of the national culture, its spiritual essence ... In the world, imitation of and adaptation to western norms was a necessity; at home, they were tantamount to the annihilation of one’s very identity” (Chatterjee, 239). This home/world binary becomes the foundation for the identification of gender roles and gender identity in twentieth-century colonial Bengal. Likewise, the cultural anxiety of this binary shapes the gender identity and roles in Kerala of this period as well. Mini Sukumar and J Devika note in “Making Space for Feminist Social Critique in Contemporary Kerala” the similar structure of the discourse shaping colonial Kerala.

Something in the shape of a “public sphere” began to concretise in Malayalee society only around the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century ... Early discussion on the established order of caste in Malayalee society frequently put forth, directly or indirectly, the ideal of a society based on gender difference as an alternative. It was and projected as characterised by the broad division of social space into the public and the domestic, deemed appropriate for men and women, respectively. (4469 – 4470)

Consequently, identities and roles were demarcated through a gender that was simultaneously something that required training and inculcation as well as “sexed identity.”

Woman’s “moral authority ... is effective not through coercion or threat, but through gentle persuasion which made use of words and emotion, advice, prayers, entreaties, tears, affectionate gestures ... Crucially, the maintenance of the contract in which Man and Woman engage in activity amicable to their ‘natural’ qualities is absolutely necessary for the availability of such authority to women. Woman should not aspire to cross over to occupy Man’s roles. (Devika, *EI* 47)

Women and home remain the locations beyond the control and changes brought on by the encounter with the coloniser and his ‘modernity.’ But the reform movements often propagated the ‘reform’ of the woman as well. As a result, women of the time seem to be caught between the discourses that desire to reform them but also simultaneously preserve their traditional roles and identity. The cultural anxiety and the simultaneous desire for modernity are revealed in the

inception of magazines intended exclusively for women – what Devika terms the assigning of ‘special slots’ for women.

However, these divisions that mark modernity are not fool proof or fixed. Partha Chatterjee in “Our Modernity” states that there is not one single definition or understanding of the term. It is subjective and historically constituted. For example, in Europe, it is associated with enlightenment and individualism. In India, it is “intertwined with the history of colonialism”(14). Twentieth-century nationalist discourses often construct modernity as antithetical to traditional cultural practices and the woman within this discourse is relegated to the realm of the anti-modern. However, according to Chatterjee, even at its inception, Indian modernity is marked by incompleteness and selective acceptance of European “liberal ideas.” (16) This is evident in the way reform movements continued to maintain caste hierarchies and patriarchal authority within the family. Using the example of medical education, Chatterjee illustrates the co-mingling of the modern and the traditional:

Since 1916 all medical education in our country is exclusively in English. But the story does not end here. Curiously, this was also the time when organized efforts were on, propelled by nationalist concerns, to give to the indigenous Ayurvedic and Yunani systems of medicine a new disciplinary form...by producing standard editions of classical and recent texts, to institutionalize the methods of training by formalizing, in place of the traditional family-based apprenticeship, a college system consisting of lectures, textbooks, syllabuses, examinations and degrees to standardize the medicines and even promote the commercial production of standard drugs by pharmaceutical manufacturers. (17)

Therefore, the binary of tradition and modernity does not hold but instead is closely related with one shaping the other. Modernity reshapes tradition and likewise, the traditional also determine the experience and structures of modernity in India. This ambiguity within the binaries is what many women writers play on to demand rights, freedom, and increased access of women to the public realm. For example, the life stories of eminent women from India and abroad focus not only on patriarchally designated roles of mothers, wives, and homemakers but also on their contributions to the public realm. The features on Marie Curie in *Sahodari* (“Maryum Peeriyum” – Mary and Pierre) and “Dr. S Muthulakshmi Reddi” in *Vanitaratnam* focus on their roles as wives as well as women achievers. Curie is celebrated as a prominent and pioneering scientist while Dr. Muthulakshmi is a philanthropist and the first female doctor

in India. Another feature “Sarojini Naidu” in the same issue of *Vanitaratnam* designates her as an example of ‘*streetwam*’ (womanliness), sister and mother as well as an accomplished poet. These women are simultaneously celebrated as ideals of womanliness (the essence of a woman) as well as pioneers in professions and spaces conventionally designated the realm of the male. They reveal the increasing public presence of women as well as the cultural anxiety caused by the fear that this would ultimately lead to a loss or at least dilution of women as identities within the control of patriarchy.

T B Kalyani Amma in “*Streedharmam* (Woman’s Duty)” argues for women’s presence and engagement in politics and social change: “Women have two sets of duties as members of their community. At present, the women of India only fulfil the first set of duties ... And that is why India has not seen the light” (4). Kalyani Amma uses the argument of ‘civilising’ the nation to justify the involvement of women at the level of the social. Likewise, T Narayani Amma in “*Streekalum Rashtriyavum* (Women and Politics)” appeals for increased representation and role of women in decision-making bodies like panchayats, courts, and legislative assemblies. She puts this as part of basic rights that should be accorded to women so they can contribute to the “nation’s progress” (6). She draws on Mahabharata to illustrate how women were active in political decision-making in precolonial times. The editorial of *Vanitakusumam* by Vengalil Chinnamallu Amma also exhorts women to take up the struggle for representation in the government:

The right to serve the country is not a male monopoly. Women have the right and freedom to engage in such service ... In these circumstances, all we can say to the women of Travancore is this: you must not while away any more time in idle slumber. Open your eyes to the realities of the world, ascertain your needs, recognize your rights, and move to secure them ... Therefore, awake, fight for political freedom. You will surely have the support and sympathy of progressive men. In the current Popular Assembly, you have been granted no place. If this experience is not to be repeated in the coming legislature, your efforts must begin now. (76)

Articles supporting women’s employment outside the home also transgress the home/world binary. The arguments against women working outside the home use the need to preserve the innocence of women’ and potential neglect of home and children by working women, to justify their stance. The arguments for women’s employment outside the home range from the

conservative to the defiant. For instance, in “*Streekalum Vaidyavum* (Women and Medicine)” the writer argues that women make better doctors because they instinctively have the qualities most sought after in doctors: “a thinking mind and the ability to grasp what is seen; the ability to endure, love for all living things, mercy towards the sick, patience ... Since these qualities are inherent in women, they are beyond doubt, better suited for this work than men” (2). Another article “Our Economic Position and Women” sees women’s employment as a matter of economic necessity: “Men are somewhat less than half the world’s population. Today the world subsists on their labour. The remaining half is inert. Just think of the difference that will be made if both parties enter the field of labour” (156). Anna Chandy in her speech “On Women’s Liberation” connects women’s employment with respect and financial independence: “When both enjoy economic independence, the other may not meekly suffer the violent quarrels and autocratic commands of one” (15).

Possibly as a consequence of the naturalisation of women’s association with the domestic space, marriage and family feature as one of the prominent subjects of discussion within these magazines. Marriage during this time emerged as a combination of western and traditional values. Meera Velayudhan illustrates this emergence of new patriarchal structures replacing old ones:

On issues such as monogamy (‘singleness of union’), male head of household, women’s and children’s dependent status, western liberal traditions were cited ... Legal changes in the early part of the century extended the power of men over women, particularly among the Nair, Ezhava and Syrian Christian communities in important spheres: inheritance, property rights, rights to divorce (66-67).

Articles like “*Pauranikakalathe Hindu Streekal* (Hindu Women in Ancient Times)” published in *Unninamboothiri* and “*Vivaham Oru Manasikaprashnam* (Marriage, A Psychological Problem)” present views that endorse nationalist and imperialist positions. The first one endorses a utopic vision of pre-colonial Indian society and attributes the current practices of forced marriage of women to the Mohammedans and the coloniser. The second reduces the problems that Indian women have with marriage to polygamy and proposed monogamy as an ideal alternative. Both articles root their notions of ideal marriage on ‘romantic love.’ In contrast, the article “*Streekalum Swatantryavum* (Women and Freedom)” by B Pachiamma discusses the need for freedom to act and speak without restrictions for women within the institution of marriage. She extends the ideas of ‘freedom’ and ‘individuality’ – terms

associated with modernity into the realm of the private/domestic (20). “*Vivahitakalaya Streekalum Udyogavum* (Married Women and Employment)” also challenges the restriction of women’s roles and identity to the home. Both articles critique the naturalisation of gender hierarchies in marriage and the reduction of women to only homemakers and mothers.

While women did not just write in these ‘women’s magazines,’ these magazines reveal the tensions and cultural anxieties around the question of woman’s freedom and rights during this time. Houtart and Lemercurier maintain that “the written word, carried through the medium of newly established daily papers and periodicals played an important part in the movement.” The content of these women’s magazines reveals the contending opinions on ‘woman’s issues’ of the time. It also reveals how these women writers were often caught between and had to negotiate contending forces of modernity and tradition that they were subject to. The assertion of the home as the site “for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture,” meant that women were invested with the “main responsibility of protecting and nurturing this quality” (Chatterjee, “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question” 243). As a consequence, the anxiety of modernisation (i.e. westernisation) was felt more acutely when it came to women’s rights and freedom. This affected and shaped women’s access to modernity. As the writings reveal, educated women had to simultaneously affirm their ‘feminine virtues and qualities.’ Pachiamma’s article illustrates the contending tensions when she uses Europe as a reference point while advocating a larger social role for women and simultaneously defends them from accusations of ‘excessive’ westernisation and consequent cultural ‘corruption’:

To turn the demand for liberty advanced by the women of Kerala into the dancing, the strolling-in-parks and the theatre attendance of western women, whose ideals of life are entirely unlike [ours], is definitely a foolhardy thing to do. I do not think that any Malayalee sister who asks for liberty will desire all that. There are many able ladies in Kerala today who have passed the higher examinations and struggle for the freedom of women...Do desist from assessing women by the same standards of change that seem to have guided today’s men... (63-64)

Her text negotiates the fine line between the modernising women and anxiety of cultural loss that characterises the ‘woman’s question.’ Another article “Modern Women and their Husbands: A Rejoinder” is a defence against accusations of moral and cultural corruption of modern young women—



The first charge raised by the author, M Krishna Menon, against modernized young women is that ‘they have begun to abandon social mores completely’ ... The further misdeeds detected by the author are that these women harbour deep contempt and revulsion towards their husbands, and do not ‘respect’ them ... However, if some women do, there may be good reason for it. (35)

These articles illustrate “the shifting roles and perceptions of women” during the time as well as the ways in which women negotiated the cultural anxieties that marked women’s aspirations for progress and change during this time.

They become illustrations of how women, especially those who had experienced the advantages of a ‘modern’ education defended modernity while balancing the anxieties of nationalism and emergent patriarchies. However, there is no evidence in these articles of critical engagement with modernity and the narrative of progress that is implied in the use of the term in the context of nineteenth and twentieth-century Kerala. Likewise, they constitute largely a *savarna* perspective. This is evident in the discussions for women’s employment outside the home. Though lower caste women have traditionally been employed outside the home (albeit unpaid labour) the discussion of women’s employment is largely confined to that of upper-caste women’s concerns.

However, despite the limitations and moderate feminist positions that mark them, these writings reflect the ways in which women of early twentieth-century Kerala negotiated the binaries that marked modernity and challenged the limitations it placed on women’s rights and freedom. In arguing for women’s participation in the politics and nation-building, access to modern education, women’s rights, and freedom within the home and marriage, they infringe on the neat bifurcations of home/world and modern/traditional that historians see as instrumental to the emerging of ‘modern’ Kerala. These articles reveal how ‘women’ of the time negotiated and at times challenged the boundaries and limitations of the ‘woman’s question’ within the discourses of nationalism and reform.

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# Contesting Sartorial Reforms: The Discourse in Colonial Malabar

V. Ashwini

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**Abstract:** The paper makes an attempt to analyze the discourse of sartorial reforms which transpired in the early twentieth century Malabar so as to understand the participation of women in the discourse. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century were rife with discussions regarding the changes that were being witnessed in the sartorial realm owing to the increased influence of western lifestyles. Divergent opinions were voiced regarding the level of ‘modern’ influence to be allowed in the sartorial realm.

**Keywords:** Sartorial, *Parishkaram*, Modernity, Public Sphere, Women

## Introduction

By the nineteenth century, colonial India had become a site of political, economic and social transformation owing to both colonial interventions as well as indigenous developments. This gradually paved the way towards internalizing various elements of modernity by the contemporary society. The encounter with the elements of colonial modernity prompted the natives to take up attempts to reform and revitalize their society burdened by the conditions of the caste system and other stagnant traditional norms and rules. Such attempts at introspection were also partly in response to the ridicule of the colonial masters who declared the Indian society as ‘degenerated’ and ‘barbaric’.

The emergence of the spirit of reform in the nineteenth century could also be seen as being indebted to the spread of “colonial education, purveyed through state and Christian missionaries, that led to an alteration and modernization of traditional social perception” (Sarkar 1). Further, the spirit of reform was closely associated with the ideals of modernity. Apart from the “changes affecting the material conditions of social life, modernity implied a rupture or distortion in the continuity of established beliefs, customs, attitudes and the

hierarchy of norms and values that determine the nature of social interaction” (Bose). The colonial society of Malabar also witnessed the reverberations of such endeavors of reforming and refashioning the traditionally validated social and cultural practices so as to tide over the internal decay caused by the age-old traditions and practices as well as to meet the external challenges that were posed by colonialism (Panikkar 133).

Such seeds of reformist ideas sprouted among the small group of English educated intelligentsia. The colonial education policy which endorsed English education along with the endeavors of missionary societies in starting schools and printing presses, the possibility of availing university education and ultimately a job in the colonial administration presented conditions favorable for the growth of a class of educated intelligentsia, mainly belonging to a new social stratum called the middle class. Being aware of the new world view, an understanding that the contemporary was different from the past and informed by the new ideas which they imbibed from Western thoughts, they set about for a critical introspection and the consequent moulding of the prevailing social institutions and practices.

### **Formation of Public Sphere**

The terrain for reforming the traditional society on the lines of modernity saw the inauguration of an era of widespread public debates and dialogues regarding diverse social and cultural issues including questions regarding the futility of tradition, the nature of modernity, the authenticity of social and cultural practices and so on. These intellectual, social and cultural concerns were the main locus of social engagement in early colonial India. These can also be regarded as the initial expression of the emergence of public sphere (Panikkar 134). Late nineteenth and early twentieth century Malabar also witnessed the emergence of a public sphere in which ‘public interest’ became the key concern and issues came to be debated in its terms. Such an emergent public sphere could be viewed as “the presence of several fora of discussions, in which participants who had acquired certain skills attempted rational deliberations on issues and themes that were identified, for limited purposes, often, as, ‘public’” (Devika 6). The emergence of the new forms of social interactions such as dialogues and debates, the development of printing presses along with the spread of education especially helped in facilitating the emergence of a reading public.

Thus, by the end of nineteenth century, the public sphere emerged as a space in which new forces confronted the entrenched socio-political and cultural forces of hegemony. However, the public sphere was not ‘public’ in the literal sense as not everyone was granted

equal access. It was largely the educated groups, who came into contact with modern ideas and institutions, who actively took part in the public sphere. Despite this, the public sphere that emerged became an important space which determined the way in which Malabar society was to be shaped. A wide range of subjects concerning the society came under scrutiny and was vigorously debated and discussed in the public sphere.

One such issue of concern was the western ways of living which came along with the Europeans. The subsequent transformations that were brought about in the society were together referred to as *parishkaram*, which meant reforms or reorganisation. They were also perceived as the indicators of ‘purogathi’ (progress). Hence, the trope of *parishkaram* assumed a large space in the discussions and debates of the contemporary period.

### **Colonial Malabar: The Discourse on ‘Parishkaram’**

The term *parishkaram* became current in the society especially in the late nineteenth century and went onto be interpreted in different manners. The writings of the period provides an understanding of how *parishkaram* of the times were perceived and contested. For some, *parishkaram* meant all the transformations that were brought about in the society especially owing to the establishment of colonial rule. For some others, it meant the adoption of those aspects which were seen as western or European. For yet another group of people, *parishkaram* signified a blind imitation of Western ways of living whereas yet another group of people perceived *parishkaram* to be the freedom to exercise one’s own choice (Pillai 50).

Most people saw it as an ‘anukaranam’ (imitation) of the Western ways of living. Consequently, they were of the opinion that this imitation has reached a level of frenzy which they termed as *anukaranabrahmam* (craze for imitation/imitation frenzy). This was an opinion popular among both men and women. P Raman Menon writes, “The craze for imitation that has crept into the contemporary society has reached alarming levels and when looked closer, one realizes that this frenzy is often paving way for vulgarity and disrespectfulness” (P. R. Menon 389). Further, he writes “in Madras province, it is among the ‘Malayalarajyam’ (Malayalam speaking region, i.e., Malabar) that *anukaranabrahmam* is more powerful” (P. R. Menon 393). Often, the frenzy for imitation were equated by the contemporary writers with madness and intoxication indicating addiction to ‘English fashion’ which leads to the destruction of the inner being similar to how addiction to alcohol can lead to losing of the body and the mind. The writings of the period, basically, expressed ridicule at the attempts by the

natives of the Malabar society to accept and imitate the ways and manners of the Europeans. Ridiculing the imitation frenzy that was seen in the contemporary period, Raman Menon writes, “Thank God that an Englishman has not come to our land with enlarged bleeding noses. Otherwise our young people would consider breaking their nose and walking about with a bleeding nose thinking that this is also a *parishkaram* to be imitated in order to fashion themselves as ‘modern’” (389).

In general, the contemporary opinions differentiated the penchant for imitation into external and internal imitation. External imitation meant the imitation of the external aspects of an individual which included, the ways of dressing, the various mannerisms including the style of speaking, walking and so on. Such imitation of the external aspects was widely criticized and ridiculed as the contemporary public opinion voiced concerns about the unfavorable results that such blind imitation would result in. An analogy that was used to portray the external imitation frenzy that was witnessed was that of a person trying to imitate a renowned musician only through action, without singing (K. N. Menon 247). This analogy indicates how only the externalities are aped irrespective of the question of capability. Thus, the people of the time were portrayed as being fixated only on external imitation without bringing about positive changes that could enhance their internal qualities.

Under the rubric of *parishkaram*, it was the adoption of a new sartorial code—inspired by the European ways of dressing—that was the most visible among those who took to western education as well as among those were influenced by the West. In the case of male attire, the most visible changes include the use of shirts, suits and shoes. The beginning of the twentieth century saw the caste groups that were more in contact with the western culture being the ones actively adopting western sartorial codes, letting go of their traditional sartorial manners which included baring the upper body and using a *mundu* and a *thorthu* only. It was “especially in the towns and amongst the officials, and peons, the European shirt, worn with the ends hanging down over the *mundu* was becoming common; as is the round cloth cap and dark short coat and among the more advanced, trousers and collars.”

When delved deeper, the donning of the European sartorial styles could be understood as a part of strategies to manipulate one’s own identity. Clothing signified social distinction in the colonial society in certain ways similar to what was present in the precolonial Malabar society. In general, clothing transmits a diverse range of cultural meanings and signifies a variety of social as well as political ideas such as hierarchy, exclusion, solidarity and respect

(Roche 33). Consequently, the body through the clothes becomes a bearer of cultural signs (Wickramasinghe 2). Hence, sartorial changes had the capability to signify new social hierarchies as well as new means of attaining mobility in the hitherto hierarchical society based on the system of castes.

For instance, as the reformer C.Krishnan has noted, on "... a journey to Ceylon in 1899; 'To be free of nuisance from other people, I started off in European fashion, hat and all. I was convinced of the efficacy of this trick after journeying in a train for some time. Because people would move away at the sight of the hat, there was no nuisance in the compartment at all.' Thus, dress could differentiate people" (Devika 257).

The popularity of the use of shirts itself asserts the idea that the acceptance and the use of western sartorial codes were often considered as symbolic of breaking the strong caste norms. Those educated under the system of English education were the forerunners in the adoption of European styles of dressing to show their western influences and thereby expressing their reluctance to bow down to the prevalent caste norms. It could also be perceived as an attempt to identify with their current rulers, the British, and thereby disregard their erstwhile superiors, especially the Nambuthiris, who trailed behind in their attempts to acquire Western education. The embracing of new sartorial codes based on western ways of dressing was also a popular way to circumvent the existing social customs and social behavior required from them. In fact, the acceptance and adoption of Western sartorial styles espoused different meanings to different groups of people.

However, despite the popularity and the subsequent respect that the Western inspired sartorial styles earned, it also invited stringent ridicule. More often, those who adopted the western styles of dressing were mocked at and were addressed as a class of 'koothankeeri jathi' (a loathsome hybrid race) (K. R. K. Menon). Those who took to such fashions were regarded as lacking in manliness, proper culture and lazy.

For instance, in a cartoon (Fig. 1.1), one of the guests comes for a marriage fully attired in western sartorial style. The bride's father asks his house helper to bring 'cobra shoe polish' for the gentleman whereas, for the rest of the guests, he demands water to be given so that they could wash their feet while everyone laughingly looks on. The cartoon here ridicules the use of western style of clothing in a traditional marriage setting. This reflects the contemporary times where the use of western style dresses was employed by those who had even a wee bit



exposure to the culture of colonialism. Further, what is mocked here is the blind aping of the west irrespective of the context— a traditional marriage setting.



**Fig. 1.1 (Source: Vishwaroopam, October, 1940.)**

More than the male attire, it was the female attire that was in the eye of the storm. The changes in female sartorial styles were widely discussed and debated within the rubric of *parishkaram*. In the pre-colonial Malabar society, the caste norms necessitated both men and women to uncover the upper part of their body as a mark of respect. By the late nineteenth century, such norms were disregarded and the contact with the British, along with the spread of western styles of attire, popularized the use of blouse or jacket. However, over time the adoption of modern sartorial styles as a means of rejection of older customs and conventions began to become popular which led to women's attire being specifically analyzed and widely commented upon. Conservative criticisms largely by men accused women of blindly chasing, and imitating modern fashions. Such empty imitation was said to have led to untoward consequences that were widely seen among the women's realm. Women were accused of not following the long-held traditions including their duties, of not respecting others and of destroying domestic happiness and community love (P R Menon 224).



**Fig. 1.2 (Source: Vishwaroopam, April 1941)**

Another satirical cartoon (Fig. 1.2), titled ‘Then and Now’, tries to chronicle the changes that has been brought about in the society with the onset and spread of modern reforms. The scene here is the groom’s father trying to broker a marriage alliance for his son. Here, the father has come to meet the girl’s father to discuss a prospective marriage alliance with the latter’s daughter. In the former frame, the father asks the girl’s father, “I have come here to discuss a marriage proposal for my son. So can I ask your daughter’s hand in marriage for my son?” In the second cartoon the girl is seen as replying, “Oh is this what you felt difficult to talk in front of me? For this, my father’s opinion is not necessary. I had decided beforehand that I would marry your son only.” The cartoonist here tries to portray the changes that have been brought among women owing to the spread of education and the new reforms. Material objects in both the frames indicate the change of times with sartorial changes being clearly etched out. In the former the girl’s father is seen in the traditional attire wearing only the *mundu* and a *thorthu*. The other man is seen in a similar style except that his upper body is covered. The women of the house remains in the backdrop peeking through the windows. Whereas in the second frame, the attire as well as the attitude of men and women are portrayed differently. The use of coloured and printed shirts and coats are seen as becoming the *de rigueur*. The women have come to the fore of the frame and are depicted as wearing saris including coloured saris. The girl is seen as sitting in the armrest of the chair talking directly to the guest. Both the men

seem miffed at the way the girl is talking. This indirectly indicates the discomfort of the men with the changes happening among their women.

In general, one can argue that women were criticized for falling prey to the ever-expanding and ever-changing fashions and reforms of the time. Yet another contemporary writer, V.K.R. Menon, narrates an incident wherein the protagonist was rushing with a bag of newly brought clothes. When one of the onlookers asked him as to where was he scurrying off. The man replied, “I have to take these newly brought clothes to my wife and I have no time to waste lest, these dresses would go out of fashion. If so, she would be furious and would refuse to wear all these and would throw it away” (V. K. R. Menon 230). This incident is quoted by the author to illustrate the fast pace of change in fashions as well as the way how these changing fashions have captivated the women who are trying to keep pace with the changing fashions, often with futile outcomes.

Thus, it is amply clear that women were more often ridiculed and castigated for adopting ‘modern changes’ in their ways of living especially in their modes of dressing. Also, women were accused of pauperizing their husbands with increased expenditure because of their frenzy for new sartorial styles.

### **Conclusion**

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Malabar witnessed discussions regarding the changes brought about by the onward march of colonial modernity. Such changes were grouped under the trope of *parishkaram* and became a matter of intense debate that helped the moulding of a nascent public sphere in Malabar which transfigured itself into a site that saw a participation of both genders. As evident from the above discussion, within the rubric of reforms, sartorial reforms underwent vehement scrutiny in the backdrop of the changing socio-economic conditions of the people belonging to the different strata of the Malabar society.

In other words, the site of sartorial codes was one of the important arenas through which the presence of modernity was echoed. As noted before, a significant trope visible in the discourse regarding *parishkaram* has been the ridicule and mockery meted out towards those who accepted and incorporated western lifestyles. Such ridicule and lampooning were coupled with sharp criticisms against the uncontrolled emulation of the western ways of living by both genders. Nonetheless, the rationalities behind the opposition and ridicule were varied. Firstly, breaking the ties with the traditional customs and thereby losing the uniqueness of the society were often used as a reason to oppose the new reforms (P. R. Menon 430). Secondly, economic reasons in the form of an increased expenditure was also regarded as a cause for eschewing the

use of western clothing. On the contrary, those who adopted and appropriated western or western-influenced attires cited the notions of progress, civilization and superiority to justify it.

Further, on the sartorial front, the female sartorial styles were vehemently debated, and often criticized, more than their male counterparts. Arguments were mustered to demonstrate how, despite moving out into the public sphere, men were more traditional than women who largely remained isolated from the public view. By and large, the criticisms emanated from the apprehension of men that women— hitherto deemed as the guardians of tradition who confined themselves in the ‘inner domain’— were gradually claiming the public space at the former’s cost. Such apprehensions were bolstered by the belief that women were in charge of retaining the inner spirituality of indigenous social life. Hence, notwithstanding the changes, women were expected not to lose their essentially spiritual (feminine) virtues by becoming “essentially westernized” (Chatterjee 126). In other words, even in the sartorial realm, while debating the desirability of reforms, the distinction in the social roles of men and women were preferred to be kept unperturbed.

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## Question of English Language and Higher Education: Early Twentieth Century Ezhava Women's Magazines in Kerala

Sreebitha P V

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**Abstract:** The emergence of magazines in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century opened up possibilities for the project of modernity among various caste communities of Kerala. Ezhava community has brought out a considerable number of magazines (*Vivekodayam*, *Sahodaran*, *Sahodari*, *Sthree*, *Sanghamitra*, *Mitavadi*, and the like) in the name of community and reform. My interest in the proposed paper is to critically engage with the discourse on English and higher education for women in the Ezhava women's magazines such as *Sanghamitra*, *Sahodari*, *Sthree*. Women's articles appeared in the Thiyya magazine, *Mitavadi*, and Ezhava magazines like *Mitavadi*, *Vivekodayam* and *Sahodaran* would also be referred as it addresses the question women's education.<sup>23</sup> The paper argues that the resistance

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<sup>23</sup>*Sanghamitra* started publishing in November 1920 from Kollam. Though it was edited by P. K. N. Vaidyar, an Ezhava male, it is said that it was published for Ezhava women. We also see many articles by women from different communities in this magazine. *Sahodari* was published from January 1925, P. R. Mandakini being its publisher and P. R. Narayanan as its manager. In the first issue of *Sahodari*, it is stated that "...communities like Nairs, Christians and Muslims have women's magazines. We do not forget the fact that there was *Sanghamitra*, a magazine for Ezhava women which ran for a short term. We introduce *Sahodari* because we feel that it is important and necessary to have a magazine with the aim of the progress of Ezhava women". Another magazine, *Sthree* was edited by Parvathi Ayyappan, an Ezhava woman, and claimed to be a journal for women and all those who are keen on women's progress. The editorial stated that the magazine would deal with matters concerning women and argue for women's freedom/liberation. They also note that there is no space for community arguments in *Sthree*. *Mitavadi* (weekly) started at Thalassery in the year 1906, with Moorkkott Kumaran as its editor. T. Sivasankaran was the owner of *Mitavadi*. It is said that Moorkkott Kumaran was attracted to the policy of *Mitavadi* and to bring popularity for their arguments he desired to bring out a magazine called *Mitavadi*. Moorkkoth Kumaran and T. Sivasankaran with the interest in the progress of Thiyyas began this magazine. After some time, *Mitavadi* (Monthly) was published from Kozhikode in 1907, with Moorkkoth Kumaran and C. Krishnan as its editors. It is said that C. Krishnan was strongly against Hinduism. In 1913 he started to publish *Mitavadi* on his own in and in 1921 he made it a weekly. *Vivekodayam* was the first magazine that was published for the Ezhava community's development. *Vivekodayam* began as a bi-monthly in the year 1904 from Thiruvananthapuram. In the first issue of the magazine *Vivekodayam* (1904), its founder N. Kumaran Asan called it the powerful mouthpiece for the Ezhava community reformation. *Sahodaran* was edited by K. Ayyappan, a rationalist as well as a social reformer. Ayyappan was against

of Ezhava reformers in facilitating English and higher education to women needs to be problematized in the context of contemporary discourse on English education and lower castes in India. The paper also discusses the inextricable link between English language and caste. It brings out Ezhava women's voice in the subject and records the historical wrong that discouraged Ezhava women's access to the English language and higher education.

**Keywords:** Women, Magazines, English, Education, Caste, Modernity

Women's question and reform in India have been addressed in various ways. Although various castes and communities have actively engaged in the reform movements, the discourse is centred around the upper caste reform movements. Similarly, the feminist framework predominantly addresses the question of women in Hindu/ upper-caste/ middle-class communities (Vaid and Sangari; Tharu and Lalita; Chatterjee; Devika; Arunima; Kodoth). Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar write:

We find little about reforms among Muslims or among 'lower castes'. Attention is centred on upper-caste women's education and on their marriage practices – which were altered largely through new laws; in particular, those that banned widow burning, allowed widow marriage, restricted child marriage. (1)

As mentioned, the discourse around education and reform mainly focuses on the upper-caste women's issues and marginalize the question of Muslim and lower-caste women. Omvedt writes how the early women's movement in India was centred around the concerns of upper-caste and middle-class women. She notes:

The first wave of feminists in India (20th century) were women related to the reformers or the nationalists, mainly upper-caste women who lobbied tirelessly for the right to property and amendments in the Hindu law of marriage. These first-wave feminists were preoccupied with issues of 'status' rather than 'survival'. It was, therefore, the upper-caste, middle-class women who drew the benefits from the constitutional guarantees and legal measures. (1985)

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Hinduism and he converted to Buddhism. This magazine was addressed to all outcastes. Though its primary aim was to fight against caste discrimination, various issues concerning Ezhavas were also discussed in this magazine. It should also be noted that very few issues of the magazines *Sthree*, *Sanghmitra*, and *Sahodari* (of which are said to be Ezhava women's magazines) are available.

Few studies question the exclusion of the study of the lower caste movements in India as well as lower caste women's participation in various movements (Rao; Moon and Pawar; Zelliot; Rege; Bharadwaj). Few scholars have worked on the Ezhava reform movement (Osella and Osella; Velayudhan; Jeffery) and Meera Velayudhan's argument that "the discourse signified both an attempt to build the 'reputation' and 'status' of a community as well as the subordination of women by controlling relations between the sexes within the family" ("Reform" 70) is relevant here. She does not seem to articulate the voice of Ezhava women in the reform movement. The present paper while examining the discourse around higher education and English education of Ezhava women brings forth the women's voice and articulates the need for English education for lower caste women in contemporary Kerala.

### **Access to Public Education: Whose Rights?**

While we address the question of women's higher education and English education, it is important to look at the discourse on lower castes' entry into government schools in the early twentieth century. Dr. Palpu writes about the educational status of Ezhavas of Thiruvithamkoor towards the end of the nineteenth century:

About thirteen percent of them are educated. Compared with Brahmins and Nairs, they are backward in point of education and this is mainly due to the reluctance of the Travancore Government to admit them freely into State Schools and employ them in the service of the State. (1)

As noted, the Government was reluctant to give free entry to the lower castes in public schools. He took the initiative and Ezhava Memorial (1896) was submitted to the Maharaja of Travancore, signed by 13,176 Ezhava community members to attain civic rights and access to education, jobs, and facilities for the lower castes.<sup>24</sup> Kumaran Asan's speech at Srimulam Popular Assembly also notes that Ezhavas were denied admission in government schools where

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<sup>24</sup> Following Ezhava Memorial, other movements of Avarnas and minorities also raised similar agendas. The Agitation for Civic Rights (*PouraSamatvavadaPrakshobhanam*, 1919) demanded posts in the land revenue departments for the avarnas of the Hindu community and Muslims and Christians. The Abstention Agitation (*NivartanaPrakshobhanam*, 1932) demanded representation in the state legislature for Ezhavas and the Muslim and Christian communities. On the one hand, these movements prove the government's injustice and indifference towards the lower castes and minorities, on the other, it marks the beginning of lower caste people's struggles against the discrimination they faced in the public sphere of Kerala



upper caste students studied.<sup>25</sup> In the editorial note of *Vivekodayam* (Vol. 10, no. 3&4, 1918) it has been mentioned that Government education is not available to all due to caste issues. Thiruvithamkoor Thiyyar or Ezhavar are said to be the most marginalized people and it is added that they are one out of five total population of the state and if this is their status, castes below them are in the worst condition. It is also added that thirteen girls' schools do not give entry to Ezhava girls.

Coming to the question of girls' education, while arguing for the right to education for Ezhava girls, Asan criticized the government as girls' schools of the state were closed to them (Priyadarshan 1). Priyadarshan mentions that Asan has requested that the girls' schools of the state, now closed to the Ezhava girls, should be open to them as early as possible and that lists of the girls' schools that were closed or open to the Ezhavas girls should be published in the Gazette from time to time for the information of the Ezhavas (14-15). According to him, the Government seemed to worry on the assumption that higher caste children will leave school if they do so. Kunju Panikkar cites incidents where Nair girls have left school when Ezhava girls got admission. He argues that the government was adamant in this issue so that the Nair girls who left school joined back. Raveendran states that though a large percentage of Ezhava boys were attending schools, sufficient interest was not being taken by the department to spread education among the girls of the community. Out of three hundred and fifty-two girls' schools, only one-hundred and eighty were open to the community. He says that Asan had requested the government to look into the matter.<sup>26</sup>

Much later, Radha's article "Female Education in Travancore During 19th Century" published in the year 1981, addresses the progress achieved by Travancore in the field of female education in the nineteenth-century. She notes that although women enjoyed high status in the society, female education was limited to the Royal and a few rich families. She argues that the missionaries of the London Missionary society took the lead in the spread of education in Travancore and following this the government got itself awakened (93). It is very important to note her observation that it was the missionary women who took the lead in female education.

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<sup>25</sup> Legislative Council (1888) and SreeMulam Popular Assembly (1904) were established in Thiruvithamkoor, during the reign of SreemulamThirunal Maharaja. SreeMulam Popular Assembly was the platform where people could express their problems to the Maharaja. See Raveendran.

<sup>26</sup> Sri Mulam Popular Assembly, 26 February 1919.

The first girls' school was established in 1819 with fourteen girls as it was very difficult to get girls to be educated during the period. Her account of literacy by caste has to be noted. She writes:

The women of the Malayala Brahmins follow their English sisters in Enlightenment, but for them, the proportion of illiteracy is no less than 80.8%. Among the other Brahmins, 90 women per hundred were unable to read and write, the Ambalavasis intervening with an illiterate straight of 84%. The Nayar, the Kaniyan, the Maran, and the Vellala are the next best educated. Among the Kuravans, Kudumis, Maravas, Vanians, Mukkuvans, Parayas, Channar, Valens, and Pulayans over 99% of females are illiterate. It is noteworthy that among the native Christian the ratio of illiterates is as high as 94%. (108)

As noted, 99% percent of females from lower castes were illiterate. The situation was not quite different at the beginning of the twentieth century. In this context, let's consider K. Gauriamma's presiding speech at S. N. D. P Stree Samajam which was held on the fourteenth-anniversary meeting of S. N. D. P at Trivandrum in which she gives details of the census report (1911) on the education of Ezhavas. The title of the table is written as "The Progress in Education of the Ezhavas of Thruvithamkoor, Kochi and British Malabar" (19; *Vivekodayam* 1916). According to her as far as the growth in education is concerned, the Ezhavas of Thiruvithamkoor stand first, while that of Malabar and Kochi stand second and third respectively. She notes that the discriminatory attitude of the government and the upper castes has debarred lower castes' entry into the government schools for a long time. Now let us examine the educated lower caste women's opinions on English education and higher education. The coming section critically examines the same.

### **Ezhava Women as Culture Bearers: Primary Education/Higher Education/ and English Education?**

In the initial stage, male and female reformers who have argued about the need for education for women insisted upon the need to have primary education and their training in feminine jobs. They primarily considered women as culture bearers and unanimously argued that the community's progress is dependent upon its women's progress. Together with the question of

community, the question of religion was also addressed. While missionary schools gave preference to Christian religious and moral education, some of the educated Ezhavas emphasized upon spiritual education of women. The question of higher education for women was a contested area and many did not want women to go for higher education. Most importantly, many argued against women's access to English education that they thought probably it would spoil women. Some argued that one need not send women to schools and home schooling is enough for them. Few women indeed argue for women's higher education and English education.

Most of the schools emphasized religious/spiritual learning and provided education in the vernacular (*Bhasha*) language and English was only a subject to study. Radha writes: "The school was primarily intended to provide plain instruction united with a Christian religious and moral education. Apart from the instruction of the scriptures, some industrial arts like knitting, spinning, needlework, etc. were taught" (104). She adds that later several schools got established in North Travancore, Alleppy, etc., and in these schools, girls were given instruction in vernacular on various subjects like history, geography, arithmetic & elements of natural philosophy, besides some English lessons. We need to note two important stages of female education as noted by Radha. In the initial phase women were trained in knitting, spinning, needlework, etc., and in the second phase, they were taught several subjects in vernacular (*Bhasha*). In the beginning stage of social reform, women were concerned about their access to educational institutions and argued for the need to get primary education. B. N. Meenakshiamma considers women as culture bearers and suggests education that would equip women to opt for feminine jobs such as agriculture, tailoring, and spinning. She notes that there are very few people in the Ezhava community who realize the need/value of women's education. She adds that many great men have said that the progress of all communities depends upon its women. According to her the education available is not enough to equip girls to follow *sthreedharmam*. She opined that if we do not include spiritual education, all other efforts will be useless. She reiterates that education should help women to interpret Hindu religion properly and to train and educate children who are the wealth of a community (*Sanghamitra*, 166).

In her presidential speech "*Sthreekalum Parishkaravum*" ("Women and Reform") at SNDP Women's Meeting held at Alappuzha, Ananda Lakshi Amma criticizes European women for

liberty they have attained and adds that luckily the idea of liberation has not attacked women in India (11-12 *Bharatbhoomi*). She reminds women about the need to help men in handcrafts and business. She also emphasizes the social service of women by citing that earlier when Buddhism spread in India the Bikkunis used to help others by establishing madaas. She proposes home-schooling for women. She adds that the education that women got from our schools is not satisfactory. According to her, money and time spent on English education is useless and women must know about caring for husband and children. She adds that women will not get respect if they learn English and they'd become intellectuals who speak English but may not know how to cook. Like Buddhist Bikkunis, they should involve in charity work and people of all caste should get admission in such groups. She seems to critique English education for women as they may not get trained in homely duties. In the same issue of *Sahodaran*, K. Parvathi Amma's article "*Sahodarasanghavum Sthreekalum*" ("Women and Sahodarasangham") which was presented in Sthreesamajam of Sahodara Sangham held at Pallippuram, argues that women's duty is child-rearing as it would help for community's development.

Men's articles that appeared in *Vivekodayam* also considered women as culture bearers. C. A. Rarichan Mooppar in his Presidential Remarks at SNDP Yogam's 10th Annual Meeting argues that the community would not progress without its women's education (1918). According to him, children are under the custody of women therefore their mental development is important for community formation. According to him, although the Government, Missionary, and Convents have started schools, community members are not making use of it. He wishes that "Our girls should go to schools and should be good wives who are useful and intelligent mothers" (*Vivekodayam* 1918). He winds up his speech by reiterating that women's education is the primary thing for community reformation. In his presidential address at the 10th Annual meeting of SNDP Yogam held at Calicut, Roa Saheb P. Raman argues that higher education is mandatory for boys. In the editorial note of the same issue of *Vivekodayam* under the title "Female Education" it is written that:

The first consideration in connection with social reformation is female education. There can be no social advancement without it. You know very well that in the regulation of our domestic concern women play an important part. Almost all things connected with

domestic life and happiness are in their hands. It follows therefore that the development of their mind is an important factor in our social fabric. ( Vol. 10, no.3&4, 1918)

He also considers women as culture bearers and does not propose higher education for girls. According to him, women's education is needed only for the community's progress.

Few articles that appeared in *Sthree* written by women also consider women as culture bearers. The first issue of the *Sthree* (1933) begins with a write-up on the women's movement in India. It also raises the point that the Christian missionary's effort directly or indirectly resulted in the progress of women. Parvathi Neminimagalam in her article "*Sthreeethvam*" ("Femininity") vehemently argues for women's freedom and asks women to get rid of long hair and gold ornaments. She also argues that there shouldn't be any difference in the dressing of women and men. However, as far as the question of education is concerned, although she says it's mandatory, she adds women should be trained in household duties and child-rearing (16). An article titled "*Adukkalayil*" ("In Kitchen") written by a woman argues for the need to reform kitchen and eating habits. It reinforces the idea that cooking is women's duty and educated women should learn the science of cooking and take care of the reform in the field (23). Sreemathi Narikattiri Devaki Antherjanam in her article, "*Sthreekal Adukkala Upekshikkaruthu*"

("Women Should Not Abandon Kitchen") argues that along with the ideal of freedom, women should not lose the influence and power they have in kitchen. She says the reform should start from the kitchen and adds that caste is practiced in the kitchen and women should take the initiative to reform it. According to her the base of the community is the kitchen. She compares community with the ship and its engine as kitchen and woman as its captain (26). A write-up titled "Women Now", which appeared in *Sthree* criticizes the educated women who do not care about the household duties. It also laments that the current education does not train women in household duties and home science is not a subject in colleges. It is added that like earlier the educated women were good housewives and they do not need education in schools and colleges and should be trained at home under mothers' direction. B N Meenakshiamma in her speech at the Sthreesamjam meeting of SNDP Yogam held at Perinadu argues for the freedom of women. She criticises the notion that marriage is the ultimate aim of girls and also dowry. But she says women should learn jobs that do not diminish *sthreeethvam* (femininity). Regarding women's education, she held the view that women are culture bearers and advises women to give focus

on children's education. She also argues for spiritual education. “*Adhunika Sthreekalotu*” (“To the Modern Women”) by Mundakal N Meenakshi Amma also argues for the training in womanly duties.

Several men's writings that appeared in these magazines criticize women's access to higher education and English education. “*Adhunika Sthree Vidyabhyasavum Bharya Padaviyum*” (“Modern women's education and Wifehood”) by V Ramakrishna Pilla glorifies wifely duties (69; *Sanghamitra*, 1921). He criticizes women who spent the major part of their life on education. According to him, modern higher education does not help women to become good housewives. Angamali M. KesavanIllyath vehemently criticizes Sitarama Mukherjee's “*A Letter to My Brother*” for his suggestion to have all subjects in the English language. Sreenivasa Sastri's “*Gruhanayika*” (“Housewife” or “Female Head of the House”) and “*Innathe Mahila Mandalam*” (“Today's Woman Space”) etc., give tips to women for being a good housewife. Sastri opined that rather than sending women to school they should be taught at home by a female teacher from the community itself. He wanted all English books to be translated into Malayalam.

Ponnamma emphasized feminine values but criticized the notion of the biological weakness of women and encouraged them to participate in public activities. Mayyanattu Ikkavamma in her presiding speech at fourth S. N. D. P. stree samajam points out the efforts made by S. N. D. P. for the entry of Ezhava girls into government schools. She expresses her dissatisfaction with the progress of women's education and criticizes uneducated parents who do not send their girl children to school even for primary education. Her account on the question of whether women should get higher education or primary (basic) education is interesting. She writes about the opinions of two groups: One group argues that women should get higher education since women must have equal knowledge as men. The other group argues that women do not have time for higher education so other than primary education they should also be trained in house management, child care, health care, etc. However, Meenakshiamma supports the second group as far as feminine duties are concerned. For her, Indian women should consider “*Parishkaram*” (“modernization”) as education, taking care of husband, child caring, cooking, music, *kaithozhil* (handicraft), etc. (8; *Sanghamitra*, 1921). According to her, the major aim of women's education is to be trained in all matters which are useful for women (9). She adds that

women should wear a white dress, be religious and consider Sita as a role model. However, her article points out that a few women argued for the higher education of women.

As already noted, a few women from the community articulated the need for higher education and English education for women. While mentioning the educational progress in the Ezhava community, in the year 1916, Gauramma reminds the speech of Dr. Palpu's wife in the first women's conference which was held during the first annual conference of S. N. D. P in 1904. She has suggested that "members of the Yogam should be cautious that there shouldn't be any uneducated girl or boy in our community" (19; *Vivekodayam*, 1916). Gauramma suggests that primary education should be made compulsory in the community. She says, once they get primary education, they will aspire for higher education. She adds that most importantly we should send our girls to school (25). It is important to note that she has promoted western education for girls while proposing that other than domestic duties women should be trained in teaching and nursing (19).

"*Sahodarikalotu*" ("To the Sisters") by V Parukkutty Amma Perinadu notes that even the number of women who got primary education in the community is very low. She adds, some parents are unable to give education to their children due to poverty. She writes about the power of the newspapers in the social reform movement and how men achieved targets of reform through it. She points out that the community can bring about changes in their customs only if the majority are educated (*Sanghamitra* 54). According to her, education for women is necessary for them to participate in the reform movement independently for the community's progress. She considers Ezhava women as active agents of reformation rather than being mere culture bearers.

Kayyalakkal Saradamma in her speech at Eramallur SNDP Women's Samajam argued for the need for education of Ezhava women. Sreemathi Devaki Netyaramma's speech at Nari Samajam meeting for education that appeared in *Sthree* is an evaluation of it. According to her, women should be given an English education. She says one need not wait until we have science books in Malayalam; until then we need to depend on English. She argues that English is necessary for upward mobility. She adds that if you need a woman only to cook, then western education is not necessary. If you need her help in other matters, western educated woman is the right match for a western educated man. It is important to note that the journal also includes

articles that promote the higher education of women. The advertisement that appeared in the journal also promotes English education.

A few women were against gendered education for women in the community. Kalyani Mundakkal, in her article “*Bharatheeya Sthree Vidyabyasam*” (“Education of Indian Women”), discusses the curriculum appropriate for women. She says that Congress and conferences have given much more importance to women's education than men's education. However, she points out how the orthodox sections of the society and reformers have fought over the aim of women's lives and the contribution of women's education to make it practical. She pointed out that there should not be gender discrimination. According to her, both women and men have the same goals in life and the ultimate goal of education is to provide the same regardless of gender (103–108; *Sahodari*, 1929). Mundakkal N. Meenakshiamma’s “*Aadhunikasthreekalotu*” (“To Modern Women”) argues for the need for women to organize. She provides alternatives to Ezhava women and criticizes Ezhava women who are happy being housewives and urges them to earn a job that will provide them both money and honour.

A few write-ups supported English education for women. An article titled “*Alappuzha Vidyarthi Sadanam*” (Student House at Alappuzha), argued that all those who are interested in community development need to know the importance of educating children (36; *Mitavadi*, 1915). It talks about the balance to have English and Sanskrit education. It says it is impossible to live without an English education and it is important to have knowledge in Sanskrit for *Sanathanadharma*. In *Mitavadi* (41; 1915) a write-up under the title “*An Ezhava Sanyasini*” mentions that English Education had reached a small section of the community. Whereas upper-caste reformers like S. M. Kumaraswami Ayyar were strongly against English education and wanted to maintain the caste system. His “*Oru Prasangam*” (A Speech) strongly argue for the need to have caste difference and claims that it is scientifically needed (*Sahodaran*, vol. 2, no.2). He says the first power that stands against the great custom of the caste system is English education. According to him, English learning would spoil the ones who learn it. He assumes that Mahatma Gandhi consistently argued for regional language education so that the caste system is retained. In this context, it is important to mention Rita Kothari's argument on English education. Rita Kothari theorizes the relationship between caste and the English language and argues that English promises to the Dalit writers as both individuals and as representatives of communities, agencies, articulation, recognition, and justice. English is considered as the



language of empowerment and its castelessness is its strength not inadequacy and it does not normalize or legitimize caste. As noted, the language of socially and economically privileged English is distanced from Dalits and other marginalised communities. “Ambedkar compared English to the milk of the lioness, and said those who drink it become stronger,” said Chandra Bhan Prasad, Dalit columnist, researcher, and chief promoter of the pro-English campaign. He adds, "If your child learns English, it's as if he or she has inherited 100 acres of land" ( “India’s Outcastes”, *The Guardian*, 2011).

We have noted many reformers' resistance to providing English and higher education to the Ezhava women. This historical wrong has resulted in a meagre number of lower caste women in the higher education sector of Kerala. We have also noted that very few women have supported English education and higher education of women. Still, a large number of women scholars in higher educational institutions are first-generation learners and it is important to encourage lower caste women and women from other marginalized communities to pursue English education and higher education in contemporary Kerala.

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## REDEFINING FAMILY: DISCOURSES IN EARLY WOMEN'S MAGAZINES IN KERALA

Whyni Gopi

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**Abstract:** The main theme of this paper is to find out the role of early women magazines in developing a favourable attitude among the people for changes in the age-old customs and traditions constituting family in Kerala. This paper considered the articles in *Sarada* and *Lakshmibai*, the early women magazines in Kerala and tried to find out the extent to which the articles influenced the reform of family system in Kerala. It is evident that the magazines focused on uplifting women but one could clearly comprehend the way the new ideas and developments related to women also contributed to family reform. The paper only intends to show this trend rather being preoccupied with renaissance of women. In short, this paper aims to look into the part played by *Sarada* and *Lakshmibai* in reconstituting family in Kerala.

**Keywords:** Women magazines, family, reconstitution

Kerala at the beginning of the twentieth century was in a transitional phase. From a phase of traditionalism and conventions, it had marked a move towards modernisation and development in all spheres of activity. Needless to say, the colonial modernity in India altered the existing system and like all the other states, Kerala too underwent a tremendous transformation. This paper tries to analyze the discourses on the family and familial system in Kerala published in the selected editions of *Sarada* and *Lakshmibai*, the early women's magazines of Kerala.<sup>27</sup> The articles in these magazines mainly focused on topics related to women. As women were the main part of the family, the topics discussed in these magazines were directly or indirectly related to the nature and functioning of the family. The main theme of this paper is to find out the role of these magazines in developing a favourable attitude among the people for changes in the age-old customs and traditions constituting families in Kerala. The articles discussed in the women's magazines clearly indicated the change in the outlook of a group of reformed people. The paper is limited to the discussions and discourses related to family and assesses the part played by these magazines in redefining family in the

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<sup>27</sup> The issues of *Sarada* for the years 1906, 1908, 1909 and the issues of 1911 and 1934 of *Lakshmibai* were referred for the purpose. The lack of availability of all the issues made it difficult to refer to all the issues. This article is mainly based on the available issues.

context of the colonial period in Kerala. So, to understand the importance of the topics discussed in these magazines related to family, one needs to comprehend the familial system in Kerala prior to the influence of modern ideas.

### **The constitution of family in Kerala in the pre-colonial period**

Kerala in the pre-colonial period was caste-dominated. No aspect of the society was out of the purview of caste. The Caste system defined family and so the privileges offered and obligations demanded from families of different castes were subject to variations. In the case of Christianity and Islam, there were divisions within them, and similar to caste differentiations among Hindus, they too experienced different status and privileges which had an impact on their familial formations. The affiliation to a particular caste determined the ways and manners in which they had to behave. The family had a definite role in the system as it was the training ground for any person to imbibe the caste rules and regulations. In fact, family during the pre-colonial period was a factor enforcing the caste system and preserver of customs and traditions. Caste determined the rules to be followed by families in various instances, such as birth, menarche, marriage, pregnancy, delivery, death, and inheritance. In the caste-based hierarchical structure of hypergamy and hypogamy, marriages existed. In the former case, an upper-caste man married a lower caste woman and in such a case the man did not lose his caste status or ritual purity but the woman and the children suffered. In the latter case, the low caste man who married an upper-caste woman occasionally failed to get social sanction. These rules were put forward through *Vyvahramala* and *Sankarasmrithi*.<sup>28</sup> In the sessions of the Synod of Diamper (a meeting conducted by the Portuguese in Kerala in 1599 AD as an attempt to Latinise the Christian church), it was realized that the Kerala Christians had no adequate Christian formation and their identity was merged with the decadent attitudes and aspirations of medieval Kerala (John 164). The sessions demonstrated the influence of the caste system on Kerala Christians. Similarly, Moplahs of North Malabar, those in Tellichery and Quilandy had the features of the Nair Tharavad (D'Souza 495). The impact of the caste system in its minimal form existed among Christians and Muslims as they were earlier converted from Hindu communities. The observance of *pula* (ritualistic pollution) was also practiced among them. In the caste-based society disobedience to its rules was severely punished and so no one dared to question it. The rights and obligations devolved not on individuals but on the families (Miller

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<sup>28</sup>*Vyvahramala* and *Sankarasmrithi* were social codes dictated by the Brahmins which in detail mentioned the mode of behavior expected from each person as a member of the society. It described the rules to be followed from birth to death which included the various rites and ceremonies to be performed.

142). Thus, families were reinforced by the caste system, it defined the nature, the form, and the functioning of the family in pre-colonial Kerala.

The customs and practices determined the functioning of the family. The internal structure of *jati* and its functioning was strictly based on locality and its customary framework (*Maryadai*) (Kurup 113). Irrespective of caste, all were bound by *Maryadai*. The family and its duties were all subject to this customary framework. Thus, the family which formed the most primary unit of the village was the basic institution in which an individual was prepared to live in the society. The pre-colonial society in Kerala was a village-based economy, that was self-sufficient and so any family located within its territorial extent had its own importance. In a feudalistic society like Kerala (as it was during the pre-colonial period) according to EMS Namboodiripad, three important aspects formed the social structure and they were the caste, joint family, and the village organization.

But generally speaking, the structure of the family was joint in nature. Both patrilineal and matrilineal systems existed in society, but it was different for different castes. The practices of polygamy and polyandry were also present, but that too varied on the basis of caste. It determined the status and position of men and women in the family. The family remained a self-sufficient unit which is composed of many members. The rules of the family were dictated by religion and caste. The family in joint nature had a common economic source based on agriculture and the senior male member took the lead. Seniority, not only determined the headship of the family, but also the eligibility of being the ruler. Though mainly the inheritance was through the female line for most of the castes, the patrilineal system was followed by the Brahmins. Several customs like *Thaliketukalyanam*, *Therandukalyanam*, *Mannanpedi*, *Pulappedi*, and *Parapedi* existed.<sup>29</sup> The Christians and Muslims were also not free from the bondage of caste and the customs and traditions that prevailed in Kerala during those times which had an impact on their lives too. So, family in pre-colonial Kerala was a kin-based institution that was defined within the context of a self-sufficient village economy and functioned according to the rules of caste, customs, and traditions.

### **Beginning of new ideas and reform in Family**

It was difficult to ascertain when and how the displeasure towards the existing family system developed. But one could clearly perceive from the historical events that since socio-

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<sup>29</sup>*Taliketukalyanam* was a costly pre-puberty 'mock-marriage' usually performed on a number of Nair girls at the same time. *Therandukalyanam* was a ceremony related to puberty. *Mannanpedi*, *Pulapedi*, and *Parapedi* were peculiar customs that prevailed in Kerala until the 17<sup>th</sup> century whereby men from Mannan, Pulaya and Paraya castes could abduct women of Nair caste who were found alone in the dark.

economic conditions started altering due to the intervention of new forces and ideas, the family system was also subject to discussions. This might be because the familial system had much influence on each individual and it was a closely-knit unit and that a slight change due to alterations had its impact on all members of the family and vice versa. It was in this context one could see that when the British introduced reforms in the land system, it had its impact on the landowning families and thereby their inheritance. The reforms in the *Marumakkathayam* system (matrilineal system) and partition of property have resulted in this background.

The process of transformation from a traditional society to a society ready to imbibe modern ideas was not all of a sudden. Both the external and internal factors led to the dynamic changes in the society of Kerala. The European intervention into the soil of Kerala had set the pace for transition in all fields. The role of missionaries in this regard was of prime importance. They had an immense role in introducing regenerating thoughts and hope among the common people who were shunned away from the basic needs, knowledge, and facilities that kept them subject to the whims and fancies of the powerful. The new faith that developed among the people brought changes in their attitude and made them able to imbibe the ideas of modernity which they had never imagined. With the introduction of English education and starting of schools both in the vernacular and in English, the ideas of a reformed society based on freedom, equality, and progress gained currency. As a result, a handful of people belonging to the upper and middle-class families who were able to secure the merits of education started to develop a modern outlook. Besides this, the social reformers of Kerala emphasized the need to stop the evils prevailing in society. They were united in spreading the importance of education among all people irrespective of caste, class, and sex. Gradually, the new conditions that developed, favoured the rise of an educated middle class who excelled in various professions such as teachers, lawyers, judges, and journalists. This enlightened group became the vanguard for reforming the society through thought-provoking ideas which were spread through the newspapers, magazines, books, discussions, and debates. The beginning of newspapers and magazines was the product of these enlightened groups. The women's magazines that emerged by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had a great part in spreading the ideas of modernity and reform.

### ***Sarada and Lakshmibai: Early Women magazines of Kerala***

*Sarada* was the second women's magazine after *Keraleeya Sugunabhodini* which is considered to be the first women's magazine started in 1885. The latter was started by men for



women and many remarked it to be more a literary magazine than a women's magazine. The magazine, *Sarada* was started in 1904 and K. Narayana Menon was the owner and manager of it. The magazine was printed in Bharathi Vilasam press. This magazine was truly a women's magazine as most of the articles were written by women journalists. Rani Sethu Lakshmi Bai, Rani Parvathy Bai, and Ikkavuamma Thampuran were the patrons of the magazine. The magazine had T C Kalyaniamma and T Ammukutty Amma from Ernakulam and B Kalyani Amma from Thiruvananthapuram as its editors. It was published only for two years and then again published by Swadeshabhimani Ramakrishna Pillai in the next year which had to be stopped when his press and newspaper were confiscated in 1910.

*Lakshmi Bai* was started in the year 1905. Vellaykkal Narayana Menon was the manager and editor. It was started in memory of Rani Lakshmi Bai and focused on the upliftment of women. The magazine was first owned by Vellaykkal Nanikutty Amma and later by B Kalyani Amma. Many women journalists contributed through articles that aimed at awakening the womenfolk. The magazine stopped its publication in 1940.

These women's magazines spread new hopes for women. They discussed, debated and shared ideas of reforming women and highlighted the need for a change from the traditional system. It clearly stood for the liberation of women through education. Though the magazines mainly highlighted women's issues, the ideas propagated through them had paved the way to reforms in the family. Moreover, women's issues were in one way concerned with the system of family. Women in the earlier times were purely a matter of family and did not relate to anything outside its domain. She never had a role nor was expected to do anything outside the household. With the emergence of new conditions arising from the dominance of British rule, the women started finding a new space apart from family. This indeed was a way to the transformation of family in Kerala. The paper does not intend to discuss women's issues rather it tries to see how the topics discussed in these magazines favored new alterations in the existing system of family and its impact on society. These women's magazines became the medium to sensitize the readers to modern ideas and popularize the good and inspiring matters from the other parts of the country and the world. These magazines widened the thoughts of the readers and became a means to gain knowledge for self-improvement and progress and thereby regeneration of the society.

The themes in the different issues of *Sarada* and *Lakshmi Bai* could be broadly classified into those concerning women and development, social reformation, family, and articles related to eminent personalities and similar details from other parts of the world. Though the magazine

focused on uplifting women, the focus was on the need of bettering the living conditions through women's education.

There were many articles in *Sarada* about women and freedom, women's education, women and English education, women and journalism, women's organizations, women and law, women and government jobs. All these articles favoured the equality of men and women. They argued that a woman who had the same freedom as a man and who was educated had a greater role in her family and society. In an article on Women's freedom (*Sthree Swathandriyam*), the author justified equal rights for women and men (*Sthree Swathandriyam* 57-59). He opined that works done jointly by men and women would be complete and successful in all manners. The author strongly opposed the old system of women being subjected to do only the homely duties of her husband. The author emphasized the fact that an educated woman would use her freedom judiciously and would be a great help to her husband. Another article by K Padmavathiamma, entitled *Malayalikalum Sthree Vidyabhyasavum*, stated that an educated woman could make a good homemaker. She supported and demanded education for women (5-9). In the article, *Sthreekalkku Vendathaya Vidyabhyasam*, Padmavathiamma, justified the fact that an educated woman in a family could avoid quarrels and conflicts, and splits within a family (165-170). T Ammukuttyamma stated the need to educate women in English which would make them helpful to their husbands. She even argued that such a woman would increase love, affection, trust, and unity. Her article, *Nammude Sthreekalum English Vidyabhyasavum* illustrated the women of English families who did all the works which were considered man's work (Ammukuttyamma 50-52). Women were encouraged to manage the money matters of the house. This was against the old notion of money being a matter of concern only for men. In the article *Sthreekalum Panabaranavum*, the idea was projected. The author protested against the existing belief that women were not good at managing money, instead tried to state that only if they were given such an opportunity, one could prove whether they were good or bad money managers.

The women journalists enthusiastically wrote articles to provide awareness among women on different issues. As they aimed at uplifting the position of women, they wrote on all subjects providing information on development and progress. K Ramakrishna Pillai, the editor of the newspaper *Keralan* presented the possibilities of a woman becoming a journalist. He suggested the different ways in which women could contribute. Women according to him could write about fashion and other stories which could help them earn income. The article raised the new prospects of women journalists (9-11). A Sankunni Menon B.A. had penned about the

merit of women in government jobs. His article, *Sthreekalum Government Udyogavum*, indicated the beginning of favourable attitude towards women willing to work outside their home. A. Sankunni Menon, stated that with the increase in education among men especially of the middle classes, the conventional attitude of subjecting women indoors started changing. These groups began promoting women to explore new avenues and thereby encouraged them to play an active role in society. The indigenous legal system was never in favour of women in Kerala. These magazines took initiative to present the defects of the existing legal system and how it was not equal for men and women through the articles on 'Women and Law'.

The magazines functioned as a weapon for social reform. *Marumakkathayam* (matriliny) and *Sambhandham* (The simple Nair marriage ceremony involving the presentation of cloth by the man to the woman) were highly criticized by the educated middle class and there were articles on it. The articles on the Nair community discussed the condition of Nairs before the arrival of the British and how they got transformed after it. P.C Narayanikuttyamma in her article on the Nair community emphasized the need to educate Nair women for the wellbeing of the community (141-143). K Padmavathiamma's article expressed her opposition to the caste system which had adversely affected the upper castes. She was against caste classification and demanded a choice of jobs. Mrs. Raman Thampi had carried out an active discussion on the topic of *Marumakkathayam* in *Sarada*. K.Padmavathiamma in the article *Parasthreemargamm* discussed the defects of *Marumakkathayam* system and the need to reform it (1-4). These articles testify to the fact that the system of *Marumakkathayam* had already been part of the heated debates among the educated class. There were articles on *Kettukalyanam* (A term for ritual marriage used by groups other than Namboodhiri) and Child marriage (*Shaishavavivaham*) which dealt with its origin and how it became part of the society. The articles expressed the need to stop those practices which affected the growth and development of women. Subjects related to social reform were included in these magazines. Ms. Chinnamma wrote about social reform where she emphasized equality between men and women in matters of education. Mannathu Padmanabhan, the founder of Nair Service Society wrote in *Sarada* in July 1908, entitled *Sthreesamudayam* in which he strongly argued for women's freedom, education, and right to choose (Padmanabhan). Such articles were really inspiring during those times when a group of educated Nair youth (including Mannathu Padmanabhan) had already started their protest against the obnoxious customs.

The magazines upheld the contributions of great women who displayed their merit for the revival of society. Articles on Valiya Ikkuamma Thampuran (Patron of *Sarada* magazine),

Rani Lakshmi Bhai, Miss S B Williams, Lady Grisal Bailly, Mrs. Dosbai Cowas Jijangir Jasvala, (a Parsi lady who fought against the evil system in her society), Augusta Ema Blanford ( founder of Girls School at Thiruvananthapuram) were of this kind. Such articles made the readers aware of women who played a commendable role in their society made them realize their hidden strength and inspired them to come into the forefront by protesting against the evils that existed. Even great women leaders in foreign countries were introduced. In the July issue, there was an article on Queen Victoria.

A remarkable effort was taken by these magazines in reforming the household duties involved. Such an attempt in providing suggestions to the womenfolk in bettering their role in the family was entirely a shift towards new ways of living. Earlier, customs and caste system determined the *modus operandi* for a family which was hardly disobeyed. In the newly emerging conditions resulting from the interactions with the British, a new educated class influenced by modern ideas started making changes in their age-long practices. *Sarada* and *Lakshmibai* had a great impact on these groups of men and women. The articles on the duties of a householder, duties to a husband, housekeeping, duties of a wife, etc. were some among them. K Padmavathiamma while writing about the act of serving their husband (*Bharthrusuraksha*) was emphasizing the role of education among women which could help her improve her service to her husband (Padmavathiamma). T Narayana Nambi had justified male-female equality by testimonies from the Hindu religious texts. He strongly stated that man and woman are two halves and they should join together in worldly and religious matters. The existing system denied any equality between man and woman and the article, *Hindusthreekalkku Kalppichittulla Yogyatha* was an attempt to change the existing practice without denying the religious ideas which they dared to do (Nambi 415-422). There were articles on parenting where parents were asked to educate their children. Guidance was given to girls through these magazines.

As these magazines focused on encouraging women to rise up from disadvantageous conditions, various news and events related to the progress of women were published through it. The details of Trivandrum Sthree Samajam of 1908, Sevasadan in Bombay, and the information of women's meetings were of this kind. There were articles giving details about English households, the women of China, women's education in Japan, and similar ones. These topics made the women readers of Kerala understand the way of life led by women outside the country. These articles helped them to realize the fact that they were not the weaker sex. These articles on great women in different parts of the world were real illustrations that depicted the

resourcefulness of women and strengthened the belief that women had the potential and they were in no way to be restricted within the walls of their house.

Did these magazines, *Sarada* and *Lakshmibai* influence changes in families in Kerala? To what extent did these magazines have an impact on the changes in the family system? Certainly, these magazines did create a new attitude that favoured changes in the family. This could be understood from the nature of membership, the contributors of the articles, and the type of articles in these magazines. Taking the nature of membership, one could observe that all of them belonged to educated, upper and middle-class group. While *Lakshmibai* was started in memory of Rani Lakshmibhai who initiated social reform in Travancore, *Sarada* had as its patron women of the royal family like Rani Sethu Lakshmibhai, Rani Parvathy Bhai, and Ikkuvamma Thampuran. All of them were women of great merit and they favoured the ideas of social reform and female education. It was a clear fact that the magazines had been subscribed by only educated people who could read and afford them. The list of subscribers in *Lakshmibai* clearly showed that most of them belonged to upper-class Hindu families. The Census of 1901 provided the number of educated people in Travancore. Out of 1000 people of both sexes and of all ages, 124 were literate. In the case of 1000 females, 31 were literate. With regards to literacy in English, out of 1000 of all population, 5 were literate while out of 1000 literates, it was 41 (Aiyer 218). In the case of education in urban areas, Kottayam, Thiruvananthapuram, Parur, Changanassery, Ambalapuzha, Quilon, and Karthikapalli respectively occupied the highest positions (218). Even in the matter of professions, the number of people engaged in literature was 3517 which included 2614 writers and private clerks and 867 copyists. The number of people engaged in education as a profession was 12812 and in law was 5455. All these showed that there were educated men and women in Travancore who were influenced by these magazines as there were not many magazines as in present times. According to the 1901 Census, most of the females who were educated were interested in religion and literature. This indicated the higher probability of influence through these magazines and the increased possibility of membership. In the 1911 issue of *Lakshmibai*, there were 25 subscribers which hint at the possibility of the spread of their ideas among 25 families.

With regard to the impact of these magazines, they definitely had their role in changing the attitude and way of life. Looking from the perspective of the contributors, the themes they discussed were sure to bring a revolutionary change in the institution of family that already existed. Their voices supported a new educated and reformed woman who would be an asset to the family and society. As these magazines were women-oriented, almost every topic

discussed in it, directly and indirectly, brought changes or favoured alterations in the family system as women formed the most inalienable member of the family. Family in Kerala had remained stagnant for a long period and was subject to religious and caste rules and regulations. The superior and influential group (Brahmins) determined the order of the society by their hold on religious and spiritual knowledge. No one dared to change the social order which was gradually crushed down by the intervention of the British. These magazines were truly in favour of new ideas and the articles mainly dealt with new changes which were required for the goodness of all. As these were women's magazines, most of the themes related to elevating the status and position of women had a direct impact on the existing family system where women hardly had a good position. Women were restricted indoors with a lack of freedom and liberty. But the ideas which were discussed in these magazines justified female education, freedom, and choice. They encouraged male-female equality and tried to demonstrate it through examples from other countries. The need of educating women was supported by all the authors who all together justified how an educated lady could take care of her family better than before and how she could be a good associate of her husband and an able caretaker of her children and family. Various articles discussed reforms to be made in the family and also critically analysed the defects of the old customs and the merits of the reformed system. *Marumakkathayam* and *Kettukalyanam* are some examples of this kind (Ramanthampi). These articles indicated a positive nod for reforming the old family system which was based on customs and conventions, where there was no scope for male-female equality, no conjugal love between husband and wife, no sound communication between husband and wife or between parents and children, and lots of imbalances in the power structure within the family. The discussions in these magazines raised the possibility for a new family system that was yet to be fully formed. The new family was composed of educated women, who were encouraged to do jobs outdoors, to take up jobs that were earlier the domains of men, and to move out of the age-old customs and practices. All these were to alter the nature and structure of family where women had hardly found a place of prominence and recognition. The new roles which were encouraged by these magazines paved the way for a reformed family system in Kerala.

It is difficult to assess the extent of contribution of these magazines in reforming family but definitely, it had an evident role in it. Through the subscribers and the whole unit behind the functioning of these magazines including the contributors of the articles, there was a good enlightened team who spread the idea of reforms in the family. These women's magazines were successful in gathering momentum towards reform. The legislation related to

*Marumakkathayam* took place in 1908 which consequently led to Marumakkathayam Reform Act in Travancore. The Nair Regulation was passed in 1912 which abolished the customs like *Sambandham* and legalized marriage and made children inherit their father's property. The strength of educated and employed women increased thereby ending the customary ban on women's mobility outside the domain of the family.

Thus, *Sarada* and *Lakshmibai* could sensitize the women about the existing old order and the need to reform. Though the magazines focused on reforming women, it gradually led to changes in the existing nature of the family in Kerala. The major shifts which were introduced into the life of women eventually made drastic changes in the constitution of families in Kerala. The various discussions conducted through these magazines familiarized the educated group on the concept of a new family in which an educated woman had a premier role. The idea of a new family constituted by conjugal love, sharing of responsibilities, gender equality, and as an institution preparing the members to exist for the wellbeing of the society started developing. In the earlier period of the twentieth century, this concept of the family became part of heated debates in these magazines and thereby they waited for a ripe opportunity to be brought through a series of legislations and reforms.

#### **Endnotes:**

1. The issues of *Sarada* for the years 1906, 1908, 1909 and the issues of 1911 and 1934 of *Lakshmibai* were referred for the purpose. The lack of availability of all the issues and damage of the material made it difficult to refer to all the issues with its correct page numbers and some other details. This article is mainly based on the available issues.

2. *Vyvaharamala* and *Sankarasmrithi* were social codes dictated by the Brahmins which in detail mentioned the mode of behavior expected from each person as a member of the society. It described the rules to be followed from birth to death which included the various rites and ceremonies to be performed.

3. *Talikettukalyanam* was a costly pre-puberty 'mock-marriage' usually performed on a number of Nair girls at the same time. *Therandukalyanam* was a ceremony related to puberty.

*Mannanpedi*, *Pulapedi*, and *Parapedi* were peculiar customs that prevailed in Kerala until the 17<sup>th</sup> century whereby men from Mannan, Pulaya and Paraya castes were feared to abduct women of higher castes who were found alone in the dark.

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## **Representation of Women Through Centuries: An Analysis of Select Articles from the Path breaking Malayalam Women's Magazines, *Mahilaratnam*(1916)and *Sahodari*(1925).**

Reshma P. K.

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**Abstract:** The 21st century shows progressive spirit in many aspects. However, the representation of women can hardly be considered as an area which has shown much progress. Compared to 20<sup>th</sup>-century iterations, they show a steady decline. The Malayalam women's magazines which flourished towards the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century showed a promising phase in the education and development of women. The paper intends to show this contrast by a close analysis of some works from this period. In this paper, I analyze select articles from the Malayalam magazines *Mahilaratnam*(1916)and*Sahodari*(1925).I will be exploring an Advertisement, a Matrimonial Notice, and an article titled *Sthreekalude Abhinyuathi*(Women Empowerment) by Mrs. C. Jacob from the magazine *Mahilaratnam* (1916)and three articles titled *Streedharmam*(Women's Duty)by K.Ayyappan, *Grihanayikakalude Vidhyabhyasam*(Education of Housewives)by N.Kumaran,and *Sthreekalum Swathanthryabodhavum*(Women and their sense of Freedom)by K.C.Naryanan from the magazine *Sahodari*(1925).

**Keywords:** Women's Magazine, Empowerment, Kerala.

We live in the 21st century, where technological innovations happen day by day, and information is just a fingertip away. Still, the attitude towards women or the role assigned to the women by the patriarchal society in Kerala has not changed much. Every day our newspapers overflow with news about dowry death and different kinds of abuse towards women, and the stories about attacks towards little girls are heart-wrenching. The recent dowry deaths in Kerala are one such example. The patriarchal society has effectively imprinted the parameters of a good woman, good housewife, good mother, and a good girl. These parameters

are measured and analyzed with the help of patriarchal formulas, especially in the case of a girl's marriage.

These parameters are slapped onto women's bodies with the help of several advertisements and through mediums like women's magazines. Several branded cosmetics and jewellery makers define the beauty parameters required to label a woman as perfect. The glossy pictures in the magazines with a 'beautiful' woman jewelled with gold/diamond/platinum from head to foot bewitch the eyes of the reader. This is just one of many instances where the idea of the perfect woman is cemented. Thus, women's magazines in Kerala play a massive role in defining a perfect woman. But, when looking back at the late 19th and early 20th centuries women's magazines of Kerala, the portrayal of women in these magazines is peculiar. They fearlessly broke all conventional patriarchal roles assigned to womanhood. They adored the pages with achievements of women in various sectors and not just in jewellery advertisements. Susie Tharu and Lalitha identify the period (the late 19th century and early 20th century) in their *Women Writing in India: Volume I: 600 B.C. to the Early Twentieth Century* (1991), opined that "the early twentieth century, commonly considered a period when the women's movement was at a low ebb, had been a high point of women's journalism. In almost every region women edited journals for women (though clearly men also read them) and many hundreds of women wrote in them" (xviii).

While tracing the history of women's magazines, the beginnings can be traced back to early 1693. *Ladies' Mercury* is considered the first women's Magazine in Britain, and *Streebodh* became the first Gujarati Women's magazine published in 1857. In Kerala, we have *Keraleeya Suguna Bodhini*, as the first women's magazine published in 1886. In her *Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan criticized how some women's magazines represented women, especially some which showed women from the light of Freudian psychoanalysis. They presented women only as homemakers; their sufferings were purposefully not addressed by anyone at that point. Friedan quotes in her *Feminine Mystique*: -

Each suburban wife struggles with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts, and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night- she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question-- Is this all? (15).

But some other magazines did portray women in a different light. As historian Joanne Meyerowitz argued in his "*Beyond Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Post-war Mass Culture*,"; "that many of the contemporary magazines and articles of the period did not place

women solely in the home, as Friedan stated, but supported the notions of full- or part-time jobs for women seeking to follow a career path rather than being a housewife" (1459). The articles selected for the current study support what Joanne Meyerowitz opined through her book.

To begin with, it is necessary to take a look at the emergence of women's magazines in Kerala. The late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century women's magazines played a huge role in the literary history of Kerala. The first printed Malayalam magazine in Kerala is *Njana Nishkhepam*(1848), printed at the C.M.S Press, Kottayam. The magazine was all about the Church in South India, and *Keraleeya Suguna Bodhini* was the first women's magazine in Kerala and published in Thiruvananthapuram. Later on, several women's magazines started to publish in Kerala, including; *Sharada* (1904), *Lakshmibai*(1905), *Mahilaratnam*(1916), *Mahilamani*(1920), *Sanghamithra*(1920), *Mahila*(1921), *Sahodari*(1925), *Muslim Vanitha* (1926), *Vanithakusumam*(1927), *Shrimathi*(1929-30), *Mahilamandiram*(1927), *Malayalamsika*(1929), *Sthree*(1933), exclusively for the Malayalam speaking women in Kerala.

"Critics did not seem interested in how the question of the education of women into citizenship and identity, as fascinatingly broached in Chandu Menon's *Indulekha*, 1889, and in Rabindranath Tagore's *Ghare Baire*(The Home and the World)" (Tharu and Lalitha xix). Both *Mahilaratnam* and *Sahodari*, intriguingly challenged and put emphasis on the less discussed arena of the very identity of women. *Mahilaratnam*(1916), published in Thiruvananthapuram, contained works of poets like Kumaran Asan and Ulloor S. Parameswara Aiyar and women writers like Mayyanattu Ikkavamma, Thaikunnathu Kalyani Amma, and others, the publishers include Smt. Mangalabhai Thamburatti, K.M.Kunju Lekshmi Kettilamma and ten others. *Sahodari*(1925) was published in Kollam by P.R.Mandakini.



Fig 1:- Front Page of *Mahilaratnam*(from Digital Archives, Kerala University Library)

Matrimonial notices are necessary advertisements in the 21<sup>st</sup> century public journals, moreover it is a highly profitable business. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, women's magazines emphasized education, especially English education. In the selected magazines, *Mahilaratnam*(1916)and in *Sahodari*(1925),particular pages were dedicated to celebrating the educational achievements of women in several fields, including law, arts, and science. A matrimonial notice which appeared in *Mahilaratnam*(1916)is quite interesting and thought provoking. The notice is in English, and adjacent to it a notice regarding the details for submitting the request is given in Malayalam. The English notice states that they are searching for a fair young Nair lady, not above 20 years of age, which is quite similar to the present-day matrimonial advertisement except for the period. The interesting aspect in the advertisement is about the educational qualification needed for the prospective bride; the notice says, the future bride should read and write "English" with a fair knowledge of music. Engaging in the sense, nowadays we have umpteen matchmaking websites in Kerala for different caste and religions, namely; 'Kerala Matrimony,' 'Elite Matrimony,' 'M4Matrimony', 'Hindu Matrimony,' 'Chavara Matrimony' and so on. The present parameters for the bride include fairness and age; even though education (maximum degree) is considered a yardstick, a job is not an essential aspect, especially for the elite class.

The parameters regarding education are notable because the matrimonial advertisements published in 1916 asks for a girl who is well versed in English and music; as mentioned earlier, for girls, English education was considered a requirement of the time, this doesn't mean that education is not required nowadays, education is essential but the way today's matrimonial notices demand the same is a tad different, it doesn't matter if they aren't proficient in English or Malayalam, they need the disguise of completing an undergraduate

degree to be seemingly educated. Nowadays, as we all know, it is pretty easy to acquire a degree certificate as we have several fake universities and fake certificate issuing companies. Thus, without specifying the educational parameters, the patriarchal society demands that the credentials are asked only to get a status in the community, and no need for any 'job' because the role of a girl/woman is to attend to the household activities. So, these parameters have an important influence in moulding the society and majority of the families in Kerala, which consider marriage as a necessary qualification for a girl in her life, try to educate their children somehow to get a degree and thus can marry a 'respectable man,' and "live happily ever after under the feet of her husband!" And this cycle perpetually goes on and on.

There is yet another interesting jewellery advertisement in the *Mahilaratnam* journal; this one is diametrically different from present-day jewellery advertisements. During that particular time period, women were not equivalised with jewels. Today, a woman who covers herself from head to foot with umpteen jewels is considered the perfect bride, and jewellery owners play the role of a "guide" about how women should wear jewels and the number of jewels she needs to wear to get respect from the patriarchal society. But the *Mahilaratnam* jewel advertisement is completely different; in fact, we need to look back to all these progressive journals to learn many things. The advertisement is about N.R.Pillai and Co. Jewellers, Sreevaraham, Thiruvananthapuram, ask for the customer's interested jewels. Unlike the present-day jewellery advertisements, they don't canvas women into wearing specific jewels to be seen as a perfect bride. "Because the creators of advertisements hope to make some powerful symbolic connections with images that will spur people to consume their product, they often draw upon what they assume are widespread common-sense beliefs" (Sturgeon 27). *Mahilaratnam* challenged this ubiquitous 'naturalness', or the very stereotypes are contradicted dauntlessly.

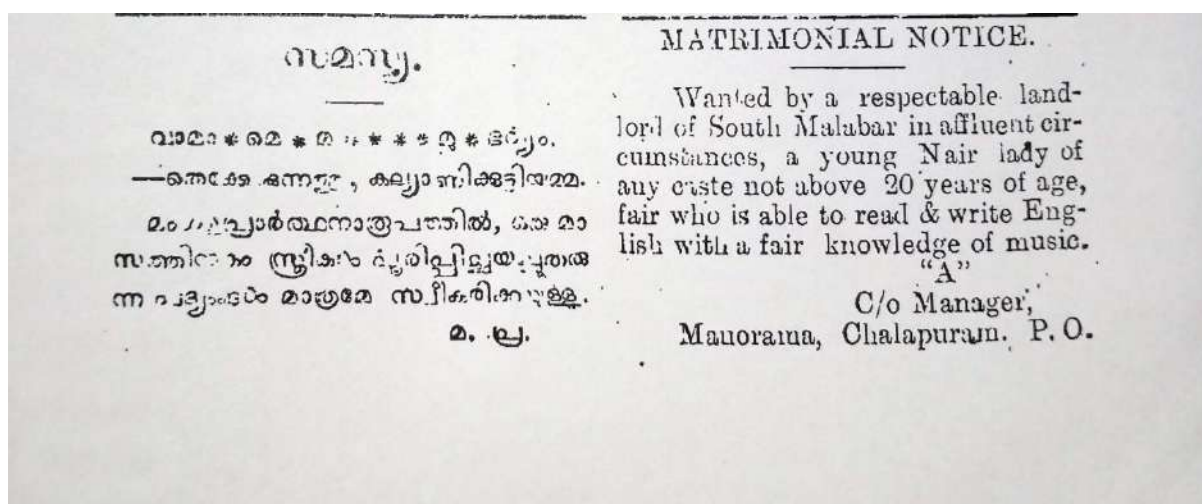


Fig 2:- A Matrimonial Notice in *Mahilaratnam* (from Digital Archives, Kerala University Library.)

Since *Mahilaratnam* carried vibrant discussions on womanhood, many scholars have studied this particular magazine and attempted to understand the 19<sup>th</sup> century discourses on women. In J. Devika's *Her-self: Gender and Early Writings of Malayalee Women*, by perusing early 19<sup>th</sup> century women's magazines in Kerala, V. Geetha expostulate in her Foreword that,

"The themes rephrased in this book, of distinctive male and female roles, the enabling power and authority of feminine duties and virtues, the transcendent claims of individual intelligence over bodily destiny, the vexed question of sexed identity, the conflicting claims of home and the world have been the subject of endless feminist debates across the world. And it is through adding their own to these contentious matters and providing a specific historical gloss on them and that these texts dazzle" (ix).

J. Devika, through her competent translation, shed light on the early 19<sup>th</sup> century women's magazines. Thus through such path-breaking works, the 21<sup>st</sup> century virtually walked through dusty corridors filled with mouse-gnawed women's journals which shattered the stereotypical moulds created by patriarchy.

In another article titled *Sthreekalude Abhinyuathi* (Women Empowerment) in *Mahilaratnam*, Mrs. C. Jacob, from Alleppey, elucidates the importance of giving primary and proper education to adolescents in understanding the concept of gender. During adolescence, children start to learn from their elders, and when the elders show discrimination towards gender, they imbibe the same. Parents teach their male children to be strong-willed and have a strong sense of mind from childhood itself, however the same does not apply in the case of

young girls. Mrs. Jacob purports a difference in this. So, primary education for both boys and girls is necessary as far as our society is concerned; she elaborates about a lady in Bologna who taught the Greek language. She uses the example to suggest that teaching girls is a good thing for the betterment of our society. But in India, we only have a few ladies who learned medicine, which affects the female community. Mrs. Jacob purports the dizzying plurality in the patriarchal society and she voices what K. Lakshmy Amma wrote, “Woman is not merely a child-producing machine” (V.Geetha’s Foreword on “*Herself: Gender and Early Writings of Malayalee Women* xiii).

Mrs. Jacob through her essay lauded the government’s approach towards supporting ladies interested in pursuing medicine. She elaborated on the universal truth that when we know the importance of education, we only try to expand our knowledge in the same way. She suggests that women with education can easily handle their household chores and at the same time enlighten themselves with the education they’ve gained. She postulated the need to be a good wife throughout her essay; it is essential for a couple to be caring and supportive of each other, not just a one-way relationship, where the wife cares for the husband. She opines that 'Motherhood' is an essential aspect of a woman's life. She even quotes the words of European Missionaries. She criticizes how some children are taught to fear the Jabberwock, with eyes of flame, and such imaginary characters are introduced to make the children eat something. She says it is not good because it makes them develop a fear of the outside world, and it may affect the child's mental health adversely; this is caused due to the poor knowledge acquired by the mother. Only through proper education can one better understand the importance of equality, especially gender equality. She asserts that childhood is a crucial stage in a woman's life; sadly, only then could she be happy with the world and could lead a stress-free life. She concludes her essay by addressing the readers to give better education to the girl child from a very young age. It will indeed reflect in the betterment of society and to understand oneself.

*Sahodari* portrays intriguing articles like *Mahilaratnam*; the present study focuses on three essays from *Sahodari* titled *Streedharmam*(Women's Duty)by K.Ayyappan, *Grihanayikakalude Vidhyabhyasam*(Education of Housewives)by N.Kumaran, and *Sthreekalum Swathanthryabodhavum*(Women and their Sense of Freedom) by K.C.Naryanan. In the first article titled *Streedharmam*(Women's Duty), K.Ayyappan gives a note to the publishers that the magazine shouldn't deliberate on chastity, housekeeping, and such. The article is progressive in more than one sense because as a male author, talking from a woman’s perspective is innovative for that particular time period. He rightly points out that there is no



need to lay emphasis on being virtuous, which is a significant concern for a patriarchal society. He courageously talks about the need for *Bharya Bhakthi* (Devotion to Wife) among men. When we assert that a woman only needs a man, it should also be complementary. He points out the binaries: Women = Slave; Men = Owner. Ayyappan asks the patriarchal society to think differently when everyone blabbers about gender roles; we need to talk seriously about "equality" and not about "subordination." He breaks away from the stereotypes with his sharp words; he adds that we can't subjugate women by limiting them as an object to wash utensils and to cook food. He jokingly asks what if Annie Beasant and Sarojini Naidu were subjugated in their roles as housewives.

K. Ayyappan purports the need for education, especially higher education among women. He adds that women should be included in politics and given proper positions in the army. He attacks the patriarchal society. As Virginia Woolf purported in her "*A Room of One's Own*": "All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point—a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved" (4). Ayyappan also talks about the urgency of women earning their own money, and for that, a job is essential. It can be a government job, teaching, lawyer, medical field, business, agriculture, etc. He adds that only by ensuring equality can we talk about '*Streedharmam*'.

In the second article titled, *Grihanayikakalude Vidhyabhyasam* (Education of Housewives), N.Kumaran, talks about women empowerment; it's highly appreciable because a man vocalizing about women empowerment at that particular point of time is rare. The progress in women's education in Travancore and the Government stipends supplemented for that were elaborated by N.Kumaran in this article; he quotes the 1911 census, where out of 100 women 17 Brahmins, 10 Nairs, 2 Ezhava were educated. Still, only after ten years (1921), did the numbers increase to 44, 32, and 10 respectively.

Women were often given primary education and used to advise them to lead a house properly, but Kumaran finds a huge difference where we should educate our women to gain knowledge and respect from society. He says that *Grihanayika* (Housewife) plays a significant role in the household. The happiness and sadness of the household is dependent on the *Grihanayika* in that particular house. Only when they are educated will they make a massive difference in every house. And he adds that education makes a person get rid of certain taboos inherent in our society. When K.Ayyappan talks about progressive changes in our community,

Kumaran adds that housewives should be educated properly, this, in turn, will reappraise the very notions of “gender binaries” created by our patriarchal society.

The third article titled, *Sthreekalum Swathanthryabodhavum* (Women and their sense of Freedom), by K.C.Narayanan from Paravoor, talks about the importance of women's freedom in the ever-changing world. He elaborates what he meant by the word 'freedom'; he means it's a mental state pruned with the help of our society to cope with the worst conditions. Like the aforementioned articles, he adds that only through a better education could we bring the very idea of freedom into reality. Education has a number of benefits and that has already been proved by the westerners, especially western women. Through better education, we can be a part of good government jobs and, most importantly, understand the importance and need for women's freedom. He urges his women readers to understand the situation and to break the shackles they are winded up with. He suggests the example of Smt. Kalyaniyamma and to take her up as a model. He adds that it's essential to teach the future generation to enter the world with a broader perspective towards life. He vehemently criticizes society's internalized sexist mind; women are always seen as an object of pleasure and a servant in the kitchen. He says that women have already entered into the social affairs in western countries, and we are still confining our women within the four walls of the kitchen and distancing them from national affairs. He says that only when both men and women gain equal freedom in society will we get a completely free nation. We vehemently copy westerners' fashion but not their attitude towards womanhood and the freedom they assert to them. He says that we've only a couple of women here who have a better understanding of nationhood and the very idea of freedom, and Vaikkom Satyagraha proved the same. He opines that it's great that at least some of the periodicals and newspapers in Kerala try to impart the knowledge of freedom and the idea of nationhood among the women readers. Thus, through this article titled, *Sthreekalum Swathanthryabodhavum* (Women and their sense of Freedom), K.C.Naryanan congratulates and wishes for the efforts put forth by *Sahodari* in doing the same.

When compared to *Mahilaratnam* and *Sahodari*, it is really sad to say that modern-day women's magazines are doing the bare minimum in order to break away from patriarchal stereotypes. Even today, the "so-called progressive" magazines try to impart the patriarchal structures to the women readers. Recently when the "Black Lives Matter " protest gained worldwide attention, the famous beauty brand *Fair & Lovely* made a statement that they are going to rename their brand to *Glow & Lovely*. However, they are still using fair models to market their product! Our glossy Malayalam magazines happily portrayed this advertisement,

too, saying it's progressive! In modern magazines, the writers try to assert the beauty standards required to be a perfect woman, "In advertisements taking place on women's magazines' pages, it is hard to come across with the portrayal of older women's faces; instead, the faces of women, which represent youthfulness, are always shown" (Wolf 6). "For women, aging is portrayed as a problem that needs to be treated" (Richardson & Locks 42). "For instance, skin products tell women that they need to get rid of the wrinkles on their faces and cellulite on their bodies, and they need to lift their face skin in order to look younger" (Ringrow 4). When comparing the current women's magazines to that of the 19th-century, the latter were way progressive.



Fig 3: - *Fair & Lovely* changed to *Glow & Lovely*.

The netizens commented harshly regarding this change; they even challenged whether the company has the guts to portray a girl with dark skin as their model. But at the same time, there were a couple of women's magazines in Kerala that were bold enough to challenge the stereotypes by featuring a breastfeeding mother namely *Grihalakshmi* cover page, dated February 28, 2018, which won critical acclaim from all over India, and *Vanitha*, dated July 19, 2016 featured a trans woman named Deepthi on its cover page too and made a historic attempt to be the first Malayalam magazine to feature a transperson on its cover page and the cover page of *Manorma Aarogyam*, dated July 17, 2020 featuring the actress Molly Kannamaly, deliberated on the stigmas attached to dark complexion. But, recently, the *Manorama E-Weekly*, dated July 10, 2021, used the late dowry death victim Vismaya's wedding photograph in their cover, where she is decked in her jewellery. Netizens furiously attacked and trolled against this attitude of a popular magazine like *Manorama*, later the magazine called off its cover. Talking of Malayali's obsession for gold, we've umpteen examples of dowry death to explain the same. The mushrooming jewellery shops, boutiques, and ubiquitous beauty parlours in Kerala are the best example to understand the people's changing attitudes towards the notion of weddings; it's a shame for them if they do not appear luxurious for their marriage.

But there are some excellent examples too, where ladies appear without golds for their wedding.



Fig 4:- Representations that Matter. Source:- Grihalakshmi/Facebook, Vanitha/Facebook, Manorama Aarogyam/Facebook.

All in all, both *Mahilaratnam* and *Sahodari* played a massive role in shaping society, and it's really substantial that these two ground-breaking magazines talked about these many things years back; even though changes are accepted by society, we still have a minority that believes that woman must be educated only to be a good housewife. The ongoing issues in the Taliban and their attack towards women are one such example. Rural, remote villages in India still practice black magic and on women to persuade them not to educate themselves on new things. The patriarchal society strangles womanhood in many different ways. Women's magazines can make a huge difference here; many innovative ideas emerge from here and there. Many women make daring attempts, and the 2021 Olympic winners including women athletes give a message to our society. The present-day Malayalam Women's magazines and the old magazines like *Lakshmibai*(1905), *Mahilaratnam*(1916), *Mahilamani*(1920), *Sanghamithra*(1920),*Mahila*(1921), *Sahodari*(1925), *Muslim Vanitha* (1926),*Vanithakusumam*(1927), *Shrimathi*(1929-30),*Mahilamandiram*(1927)played a pivotal role in shaping our society. The 19th-century womens' magazines provided opportunities for the women to talk from their perspective, and more importantly even educated men at that point of the time wrote furiously for the upliftment of women in our society and most of them purported the idea of spreading education among both female and male community. Through magazines like *Mahilaratnam*and *Sahodari* the social reformers at that early age itself spread the words of knowledge, but sadly most of the modern women's magazine fails to spread the

same message; even though we boast ourselves as the most progressive society, we are still clinging on to the patriarchal norms and customs.

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# Unequal Laughter: Cartoons and Gender Stereotyping in Modern Kerala

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**Abstract:** The present study analyses different gender images in the cartoons and comic strips that appeared in magazines and newspapers of 20<sup>th</sup> century Kerala. The study explores the nature and depth of stereotypical and archetypical representations of women and men involved in cartoons. Stereotyping tends to occur where there are gross inequalities of power (Hall 258). Here power is directed against the subordinate group, women. Women are the main subject matter of laughter in cartoons, and women-specific humour/cartoons are overloaded with stereotypes. Women's craze for new dresses and ornaments, passion for fashion, imitations for western ideas and styles, images of women active in the club, women's pompousness, etc., are some aspects of stereotyping. Women and their character traits appear as a laughing matter in cartoons and comic strips. However, man is laughed at for being a 'henpecked' husband who fears his wife. Here too, a woman is the reason behind laughing at men. In most of the cartoons, women are seen as a product and taste factor for laughter. Such stereotypes are still continuing to play a powerful role in the popular perception of gender.

**Keywords:** Gender, Laughter, Stereotyping, Cartoon, and Misogyny

## Introduction

A cartoon is a comical or satirical drawing; it is a powerful medium to perform various functions: to ridicule the unjust, to laugh at the new changes, to mould the opinions of the public, to advertise the value of products, to take corrective measures, and to create humour sense (Billig; Duss 965-997). The development of cartoons as a comical art is associated with Italian brothers Annibale Carracci (1560- 1609) and Agostino Carracci (1557-1602). In 1590, they produced a series of drawings of baroque style which gradually led to the development of the words caricature and cartoon. Cartoon and caricature have emerged and more flourished with the development of pictorial journalism in India too (Mitter 120-172). In India, cartoons are adopted from *Punch* magazine of London which circulated with the advent of British power

in India. Punch made a deeper impression in colonial India and gave way for the emergence of similar humorous publications in India. Modern innovations made urban India into a ‘visual society’ dominated by printed image. The earliest newspapers that carry political cartoons in India were the English-owned ‘*Bengal Hurkaru*,’ the *Indian Gazette* (the 1950s), etc. Early Magazines with cartoons are *Delhi Sketch Book*, *Momus*, the *Indian Charivari*, the *Oudh Punch*, the *Delhi Punch*, the *Indian Punch*, the *Punjab Punch*, *Urdu Punch*, *Gujrati Punch*, *Hindi Punch*, *Basantak*, the *Avadh Punch*, *Parsi Punch*, etc. The development of print and the access to literary products paved the way for the making of a new cultural taste and sensibility among the people.

From the second half of the nineteenth century onwards cartoons are incorporated in magazines and newspapers in India. In the context of Kerala, it was well-known satirists such as Sanjayan and E.V. Krishna Pilla who incorporated cartoons for the first time in their writings in the print media. Notable cartoonists during this time were M. Bhaskaran, Yesudasan, Aravindan, Sukumar, Toms, Gopikrishnan, and Soman. It is only recently that historians have started analyzing cartoons as a key to understand the cultural codes and sensibilities of the past. In Europe, from the eighteenth century onwards cartoons appeared in newspapers. But it was only in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the practice of using cartoons with strong political overtones became general in newspapers and magazines. Studies that appeared in India mainly focused on comic traditions in ancient Indian literature, the universality of laughter, transcultural trends in comic traditions, art history of nationalism and political movements in India, the practice of cartooning, etc. (Siegel; Mitter; Hans Harder et al.)

On the basis of themes, cartoons are categorized into political cartoons, editorial cartoons, children’s cartoons, social cartoons, gender-specific cartoons, etc. Cartoon drawings are combined with texts mostly in speech balloons or as captions to communicate the message. Comic strips are a series of drawings inside boxes that tell a story. The broad categorization of cartoons, though the distinction does not work always, is made by some scholars based on cartoons of opinion and joke cartoons (Milton Kemnitz 81-93). Cartoons of opinion mostly appear on the editorial page while joke cartoons are identified as reflecting social attitudes. Editorial cartoons, usually consist of a single panel and mostly incorporates a caption or speech balloons. Compared to political cartoons, social cartoons are overloaded with stereotypes. The present study tries to understand the representations of different gender images in the cartoons of 20<sup>th</sup> century Kerala in the context of its social and cultural history. The study focuses on visual caricatures including comic strips and cartoon columns in Malayalam magazines.

Stereotypes play a decisive role in constructing gender identities. Stereotypes reflect an oversimplified conception of the targeted group on the basis of the 'typical' traits generalized. Stereotypes are crucial for the effectiveness of cartoons. It carries popular visions of gendered subjects in everyday life.

### **Stereotypical traits and Gendered Images**

Gender has been seen as a vital subject matter for stereotypes and it circulates in/through the various genres such as cartoons. Positive as well as negative traits involved in gendered cartoons are crucial elements in fashioning or disciplining the targeted subjects as well as in determining the 'natural' qualities and capabilities attached to womanhood and manhood. In other words, 'positive' and 'negative' traits constitute the decisive elements of cartoons in the conceptualization of manliness and womanliness. It is through these traits of 'ideal' and 'contrary' that images are caricatured in cartoons. Cartoons reflect different shades of gender-related characteristics. It has different functions and connotations in society. One main claim is that cartoonists project stereotypical images mainly to eliminate and exclude negative traits. But these stereotypical elements are very vital for creating humour sense. It can be seen that most of the stereotypical frameworks are still continuing to play a powerful role in the popular perception of gender.

Changing space of women and men, women's entry into the public sphere for education and job, romantic love, women's movement for equal rights, the quarrel between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, dominating wife and henpecked husband, family planning, women's associations, and clubs, women's craze for fashions and ornaments, etc., are some of the major themes represented in the cartoons of 20<sup>th</sup> century Kerala. Women's craze for new fashions and ornaments are the center figure of caricature in gendered cartoons even today. As a way of lampooning, most of the cartoons represent a reversed role of man and woman different from the old order. The 'new' women in the home attain a state of workless leisure by giving over their domestic duties to the servant. Some other cartoons caricature a new woman as one who enjoys a new kind of workless leisure and depends on the husband for domestic work. On the other hand, 'new' man needs to learn cooking, should have good knowledge of women's dresses, new fashions and styles in their dressings. The emergence of a number of women's movements in Kerala was the general historical context in which gender issues were debated,



contested, and caricatured. Women's movements and their massive propagandist measures were some of the issues caricatured in cartoons and comic strips. Caricaturing character 'traits' has become a central part of cartoons. Woman nurse, film actress, woman police, women in the club, westernized woman and man, woman lawyer, society lady, dominating wife and henpecked husband are fixed character figures in the language of laughter. Thus, cartoons play a central role in shaping and popularizing images of women and men. Cartoonists use aspects of women and women-specific themes as a crucial element for creating laughter which is a central tactic for marketing cartoons, comic strips, and women's magazines.

Figure I<sup>i</sup> illustrates the image of a small boy retorting back to his mother who is a film actress. The cartoon targets the immoral character of film actress. The boy says: 'Mammy, the new daddy you brought me yesterday is extremely bad... He beats me...' Cartoons even laugh at the woman as traffic police. In cartoon figure II<sup>ii</sup>, while a policewoman was on traffic duty, an accident took place due to her failure in giving proper direction to the drivers. One person explains the reason for the accident to another: 'accident took place when the attention of the traffic police was on a sari shop nearby.' Here the cartoonist aims to target women's craze for sari and caricatured it as very natural to womanliness. The indirect message in this cartoon is that a woman is not fit for such jobs as it requires an attitude of high seriousness.



Figure I



Figure II

Cartoons reflect gender relations in a biased manner. Compared to men, cartoons target women for their traits, mannerisms, their craze for ornaments, dresses, passion for new fashions, pompousness, jealousy, etc. Though men too have their own traits and masculine nature, cartoons explore women as an object of laughter. Women appear as both objects as well as subjects of laughter.

### Women's "Craze" for new attires and Ornaments

Activities of women in their exclusive associations and clubs, their fascination for new attires and ornaments, and the interest shown in selecting them, and their sense of fashion constitute a major subject in cartoons and comic strips even now. Women's passion for new attires and fashionable ornaments are a stereotypical theme that persistently caricatured in comic narrations. Figure III<sup>iii</sup> is the best example of such cartoons which appeared in *Sanjayan* magazine in 1938.

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നഞ്ചയൻ



### അവളെക്കൂട്ടിപ്പോയാൽ—!

ഷാപ്പുകാരൻ—അമ്മാ, ഇത് അല്ലെങ്കിൽ ചിന്തിക്കൂ. ഈ ജാതി ഇതൊന്നോ ഈ ജോർ മുഴുവൻ തിരഞ്ഞാൽ കാണുകയുണ്ട്... ഇപ്പോൾക്കുതന്നെ നീയെഴുതിയതിന്റെ നിറത്തോട് ഈ പൂപ്പണി അല്ലേലായിത്തീരും. കെട്ടുകൾ കെട്ടിപ്പോയത് സാധിച്ചിട്ടു; ഇത് വേറെത്തന്നെ ഒരു പാർസലാക്കിപ്പോട്ടേ... ..

ഭർത്താവ് (സ്വതന്ത്രഗതം): ആ കഴുത്തയുടെ തലമേൽ തച്ചുകൊണ്ട് അടുപ്പിച്ചാൽ പോയല്ലോ! വേറെ പാർസലാക്കി കെട്ടാമോ? ഡബ്ബോ!!

Figure-III

### Shopping with her!

The Shop-Owner/salesman: “Amma! This is pure stuff. If you search the entire bazaar, you will not find a similar one. This pattern will rightly match with the blouse you have selected just now. It doesn’t matter that the packing is over, I can pack it separately.”

“Husband (soliloquy): “Why no one dares to thrash up that ass’s head?!”

Hm! What did he say? ‘I can pack it separately!’

In this cartoon, men are “helpless” when women become crazy about attires and ornaments. Women are portrayed as eagerly observing other women’s ornaments, dresses, and fashion. Their “craze” for newly designed ornaments and dresses appear repeatedly in cartoons. Cartoons that appeared in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century also reflect similar images of women with different dimensions. Women are also caricatured for their attempt to usurp men.



Figure IV

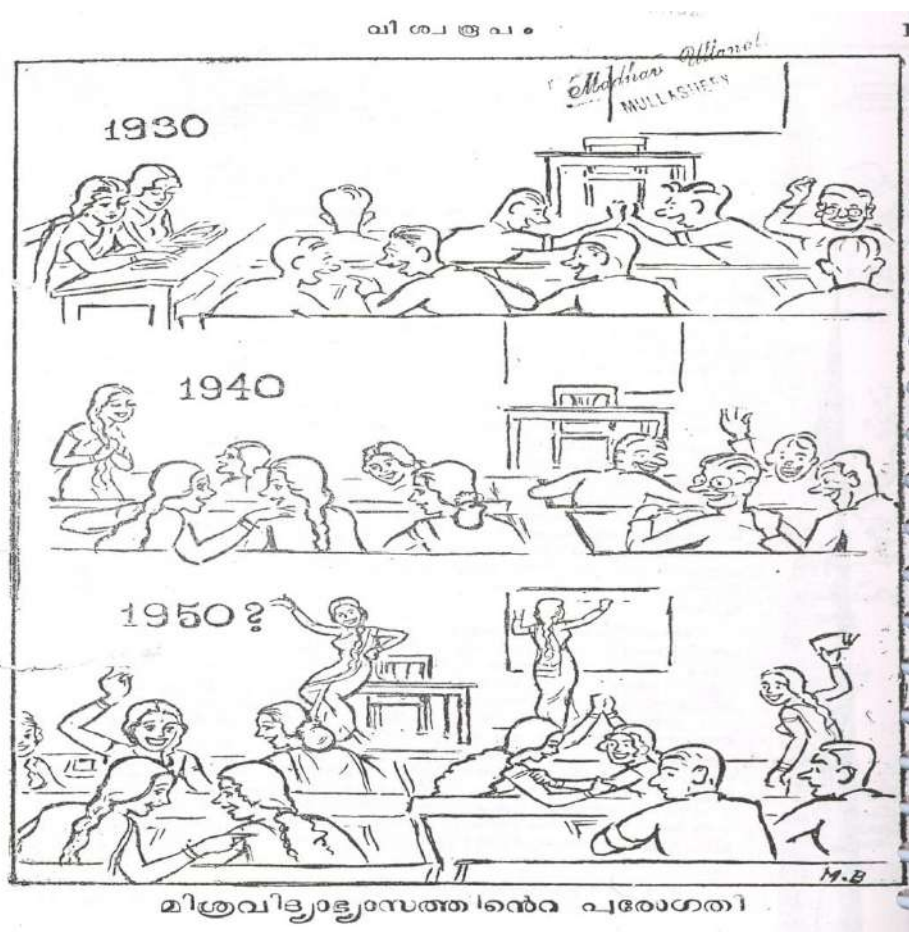


Figure V

Cartoon figure IV<sup>iv</sup> and V<sup>v</sup> caricature women for their craze in wearing men's dresses. Women wearing trousers and shirts were usual scenes of cartoons during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. In both of these cartoons husband asks his wife to return his shirt and trousers as it is time for him to go to his office. There were discussions in women's magazines about the type of dresses women should wear in society. In 1986, *Grihalakshmi* magazine conducted a survey among the male youth with regard to the dress that women need to wear.<sup>vi</sup> All the members suggested a modest way of dressing while a minority among them said that if men are permitted to wear pants or jeans and shirt the same should be allowed for women too.

### Caricaturing women's entry into the public space

Women's attempts to enter various institutions for education and job are targeted through cartoons. Humorous literature and cartoons caricature women like the ones who controls the home and husband and their entry into the public space gradually led them to dominate the public space too. Physical strength is not the quality of women rather their 'natural' qualities such as cleverness, influence, gentle power, etc., help them to control men at home and in society.



### ‘The Progress of Mixed Education’

Figure VI

The cartoon Figure-VI<sup>vii</sup> warns about the future of mixed education. The cartoon appeared in *Viswaroopam* magazine in 1940. Cartoonist expresses his anxieties about women’s entry into public institutions which he thinks gradually would lead women to dominate men in the public space too. Associating women with the domestic space became the central ideological conviction with which emergent reformism addressed various issues related to women. Women’s entry into the public space for education and job was caricatured as an extension of women’s domination over men from home to the public institutions. In this cartoon, women dominate over men even in the classrooms and men get sidelined as onlookers. The first column illustrates the situation in the 1930s, when few women are present in the classroom in the presence of men, and women are portrayed as silent in a disciplined manner. Unlike women, men during this period are illustrated as delightful and talking to each other while sitting in their own seats. But by the 1940s the situation changes with the presence of about sixty percent women and forty percent men in the classroom where still men are happily commenting on women and talking among themselves. By the 1950s men’s participation in education became



marginalized into two percent and are represented as restrained observers of women's activities. Anxieties about the new changes are exaggerated through these cartoons. Even in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, we realize the fact that women's space in society is constrained in various ways, though their strong representation is witnessed in almost every sphere. Many of the cartoons have also shared anxieties about men's changing space, and 'henpecked' image of man. In a diverse manner, cartoons targeted women who breaks out of the confines of home.

### **Recurring Image of “obedient” Husbands**

Husband's obedient and weak nature is a theme that repeatedly appear in many cartoons. On the contrary, wives are represented as dominating husbands with their 'natural' qualities. In many comic traditions, a woman (goddess Kali) is represented as a fierce virago and termagant (Siegel 94-144). Henpecked man is caricatured as one who never dared to contradict his wife. They are controlled by their wife. One interesting dimension of such cartoons is women are used as instruments to laugh at men. At the same time, women too are targeted for their nagging and overbearing attitude. Many of these cartoons depict women as the real masters and men as someone who really is in fear of one's wife. But in public, they proudly say that everything is decided by men. Cartoons, as well as comic writings, focus on men's lack of freedom, particularly after marriage. Cartoons pose interesting dimensions of men's fear of their wives. Here the cartoon exaggerates how the presence of the wife evokes fear and racing of heartbeats amongst husbands. In one such cartoon, Cartoonist illustrates men who always seek their wife's opinion for doing anything in life. For instance, a dialogue between the employer and the worker goes like this:

- Worker: “Boss, my wife forces me to plead with you for increasing my salary.
- Boss: Let me ask my wife whether it's possible to increase your salary and let you know tomorrow.”<sup>viii</sup>

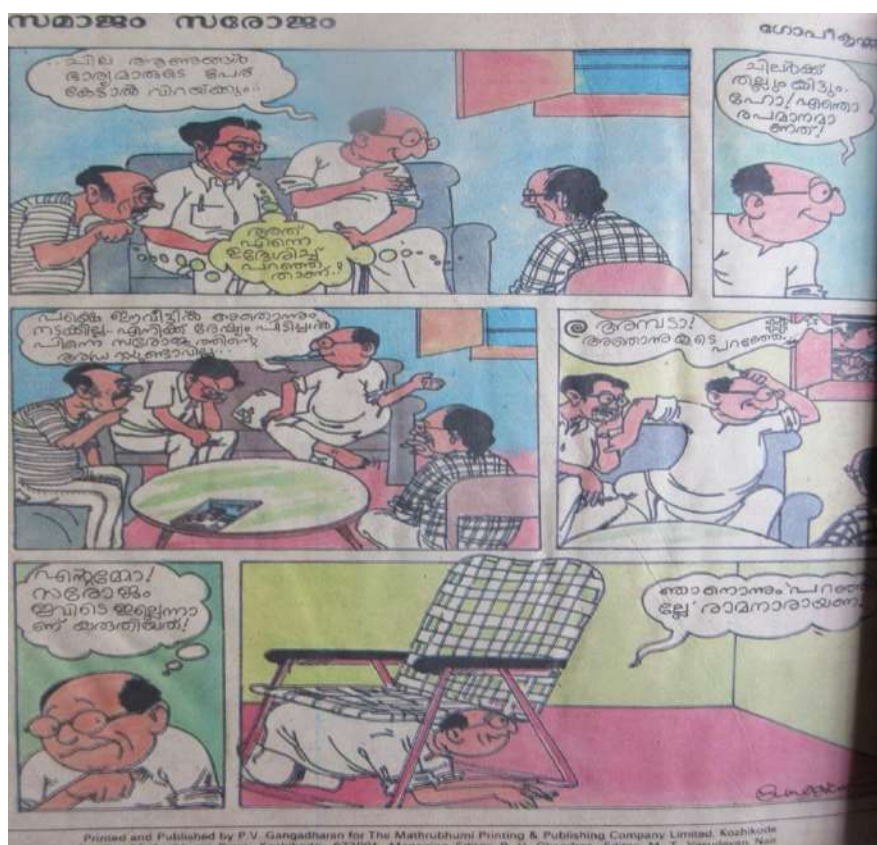


Figure VII

Cartoon VII<sup>ix</sup> depicts one such comic story of men who are afraid of their wives. “Samajam Sarojam” by Gopikrishnan is a cartoon column that appeared in *Grihalakshmi*, a popular women’s magazine in the late twentieth-century Kerala. In this story, a group of men gathered along with Mrs. Sarojam’s husband at their home. Mrs. Sarojam, the main protagonist in this story is a society lady known among friends and neighbors for her dominating presence in the family. In a gathering in their house, her husband told other men that some men shiver at the mention of their wife. The cartoon shows all other men murmuring in soliloquy, “that is told about me.” Mrs. Sarojam’s husband continues his heroic boasting about his manly power laughing at the effeminate behavior of some men. He says: “some men used to get beaten up by their wife. What a shame it is? But it’s not at all possible in this house. If I am angry, Sarojam won’t be even approaching me.” Listening to these words Sarojam screamed at him: “Hey, just repeat that...” Only at that moment, her husband could realize that she was there at the home. His soliloquy: “...I thought Sarojam is not here”. Hiding under the chair he faced the situation in a tricky manner replying that he didn’t say anything.

The changing nature of the relationship between husband and wife during their life is depicted in various ways. The cartoon illustrates their emotional attachment in the initial period and the development of a sense of detachment in their relationship during the later stages. In a

cartoon, the elaboration for the term ‘wife’ is caricatured two senses. The cartoon figure VIII gives an elaboration of the term ‘wife’ in the two columns differently on the basis of the experience before and after the marriage. Elaboration given before the marriage for the term ‘wife’ is ‘Wonderful Instrument for Enjoyment.’ But after the marriage husband made a correction saying that the term ‘wife’ means ‘Worries Invited for Ever.’<sup>x</sup>



Figure VIII

Women’s entry into the public space for jobs and other activities posed a serious threat to manly power and qualities. Cartoons and comic strips reflect anxiety about the ‘modern’ transformations of home. Women’s jobs and activities outside the home demanded men’s care and involvement in domestic duties and management. This aspect is exaggerated in cartoons using the technique of role reversal where women’s role mainly changed into society lady/club women who dominate husband by giving instructions and commands. Cartoons exhibit a new role for husbands which is similar to the ‘traditional’/subservient role of women who accomplish all domestic duties. In twentieth-century Kerala, one can find many cartoons and comic strips drawn by men in women’s magazines which mainly targeted women who were involved in club activities and associations. “Mrs. Nair” by Yesudasan is a most popular comic strip published in *Vanitha* magazine. A popular women’s magazine called *Grihalakshmi* consists of a comic strip called “Samajam Sarojam” by Gopikrishnan. Thikkodi and *Mahila Chandrika*’s “President Kunjamma” by Sageer are examples of women-centered comic strips. Apart from this most of these women’s magazines contain cartoons targeting women drawn by men.





Figure IX

Figure IX<sup>xi</sup> shows the image of a dialogue between two women while the man is involved in cooking.

- Visitor: 'Your servant looks handsome. Where did you get him from?'
- Wife: 'Keep your voice down. He is my husband!'

The above cartoon is drawn to target women who treat their husbands like a servant. New conceptualizations of gender and new family forms naturally led to blurring the gender roles at home too. Cartoonists are interested to target any kind of deviation from the traditional social system. Middle class or lower middle-class women's entry into the public space for club activities or women-specific activities and jobs gradually demanded men's support and involvement in domestic duties. This situation evoked widespread discontent and anxiety among male cartoonists, leading them to caricature these new trends in an exaggerated way. These cartoons caricature husbands doing domestic duties and becoming homemakers when the wife is more engaged in club activities and associations. Media and news about the feminist redefinition of gender and women's initiatives in public space too influenced male cartoonists to caricature these themes.

In *Vanitha* magazine cartoonist Yesudasan has given an autobiographical sketch on the context in which the comic strip "Mrs. Nair" was created in 1981. He mainly targeted club women and society ladies in this series and the main male character is simple-minded one who obeys his wife. Mrs. Nair represents a clever woman who takes decisions, mostly quick-tempered and smart and has a craze for fashion, make-up, hospitality, etc.<sup>xii</sup> Cartoonist Yesudasan shares his experience and two inspiring incidents for introducing the popular cartoon strip in *Vanitha* magazine. The story goes like this: "It is about an incident that

happened before 12 years. Along with a film producer friend I went to meet a film actress at her home in Chennai to invite her for an art programme. While we were talking to the actress and her mother, we saw an old man passing many times to Kitchen carrying water in a bucket from the downside well. As her mother might have found it inconvenient, passing in front of them dropping water on the floor, she told him, 'Now wait for some time. Take water from the well after sometime.' ... After talking about the inauguration date and the deficiency of drinking water we came out and got into the car. While we return my friend explained: 'Did you know the person who carried the water from the downside.' I said no. My friend said 'he is the father of the film actress.'<sup>xiii</sup> This is one incident that influenced characters such as Mr. Nair and Mrs. Nair.

Along with this, another incident is also narrated by him: "After some years into this incident, I met one business person in Delhi. His wife is an IAS officer who works somewhere in Uttar Pradesh. But every week she comes to Delhi and they used to take food from outside. Wife and husband belong to two different states. It was the present Indian high commissioner B. A. C. Nair who introduced them to me. One day they invited us to the hotel for having food with them. When we just finished our soup, disagreements arose between them. The reason was their four year old child had started crying. ... With a crying voice wife complained, 'My husband does not take care of the child. I never saw him utter a word even to the child lovingly. ... Sarcastically she asked me, I know my husband is from your native place. You tell me is there anything wrong in what I said.' As a solution for this issue, her husband silently left the place with the baby. ... While coming out after having food, we saw the father and the child playing inside their car.'<sup>xiv</sup> Yesudasan's autobiographical sketch explains that these two incidents made him create the comic image of a dominant wife and homemaker husband and that was the beginning of a new comic strip 'Mrs. Nair' in *Vanitha* magazine. But the interesting dimension is that such incidents play a dominant role in conceiving stereotypical images of gendered groups and redeploying those images. Husband's involvement in domestic duties is targeted as 'deviating' from norms and reflected in and through cartoons and comic literature. Such cartoons even target men for losing their manly power after becoming "henpecked" husbands. One may not find any comic elements or cartoons which target husbands' overrule and violence against his wife.

## Women in Cartoons and the Question of Humour Sense

In 1982, *Grihalakshmi*, a popular women's magazine in Kerala initiated a discussion on 'woman in cartoons and humour.'<sup>xv</sup> Cartoonist Yesudasan and Sukumar were involved in the discussion along with a group of women who work in different fields of society. They included Rathnakala S. Menon, T. Devi, Vijaya Ramachandran, Padmaja Menon (Vice-chairman, Kerala University Union), Padmini, and Jameela Ibrahim. Almost all members pointed out the corrective aim behind cartoons. However, as mentioned by cartoonists, women become the main subject matter of cartoons due to the high market value and demand for such themes in the market. Well-known comic Yesudasan says: 'Humour sense of this world itself is surrounding the women. It is not possible to write or draw cartoons about men's high heeled slippers, cookery class, etc. ... Women are commodities that are easily available for cartooning...I don't think that such cartoons obstruct the development of women. It is women who first enjoy these cartoons which appear in these magazines. ... Cartoons on men are rejected by editors while women-specific cartoons are easily acceptable to publish in 70 mm page even.'<sup>xvi</sup> The final solution which Yesudasan suggested for this problem is the emergence of woman cartoonists and their cartoons against the misogynistic cartoons of men. The whole discussion proves a point that women in these cartoons become an object of laughter or commodity to create laughter for the purpose of raising the market value of the magazine. Women are very much related to consumerism and cosmetic culture. They are a vital component and become a 'taste' factor for increasing the taste of laughter.

Another issue very much related to this is an allegation that 'women had no place in the creation of humour' because they 'lack a sense of humour compared to men' (Walker). According to Walker, a sense of humour requires intelligence and understanding a situation before one can see the humour in it. Famous Malayalam Satirist Sanjayan has also evoked sarcasm against the lack of woman humorists. Why do we have very few women cartoonists and humorists? Why were women rarer in the cartoon field or comic narrations? American cartoonist Betty Swords raises this question in her article and completely disagrees with the point that women lack a sense of humour (65-84). She identifies two main reasons behind the scarcity of women in this area. Discrimination women face in society is one main factor. Another possible reason is, as women-specific themes are having more market value in cartooning, she argues that women need to have very low self-esteem to come up with cartoon drawings that are so hateful and hostile to women. According to her, it would be difficult for a

woman cartoonist to follow these ugly stereotypes of women. In other words, she puts it: “Women don’t make the jokes because they are the joke.” Here one can see that stereotypes play a very important role in humour and cartoons. In such a situation woman cartoonists’ existence itself is based on how far one utilizes self-deprecating humour in their cartoons and humour. As a woman cartoonist, she discusses the difficulties one faces to develop an alternative cartoon style avoiding misogynic stereotypes.

## Conclusion

New changes and discontents brought about by colonial modernity, women’s craze for fashions, new dresses and ornaments, new initiatives to organize women’s associations and clubs evoked serious criticism among the cartoonists. There emerged many comic strips and cartoon columns in magazines targeting women for their initiatives and character traits in a misogynistic manner. All of these cartoons and comic strips were drawn by male groups. Changing roles of women and men are caricatured in these cartoons with stereotypical images and redeploying of those images. The traditional homemaker role of women was redeployed into men and thereby cartoons evoked laughter. Women active in clubs and associations are laughed at for their vain, glorious and pompous talks. They are caricatured as dominating and at the same time dependent women who need the help of husbands as well as servants in various ways. At the same time, a good number of cartoons target women for overruling their husbands at home. Many of these cartoons caricature women for treating their husbands as servants at home. Cartoonists use women as objects of laughter and a crucial component to create the taste factor in laughter. Cartoons even commodify women for laughter and play a major role in popularizing such images of women.

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<sup>i</sup> Cartoon, *Grihalakshmi* vol. 5, no.1, (July 1983), P.25

<sup>ii</sup> Cartoon, *Grihalakshmi* vol. 8, no.11, (May 1987), p.35

<sup>iii</sup> M. Bhaskaran, “Avalekkuttippoyal-!” (If she is taken along with ...!), cartoon, *Sanjayan* vol. 2, no. 20 (Aug. 1938), p. 544.

<sup>iv</sup> Cartoon, *Grihalakshmi* vol.6, no. 5, (November 1984), p. 5

<sup>v</sup> Cartoon, *Grihalakshmi* vol.2, no.6, (December 1980), p. 12

<sup>vi</sup> Preethi, “Streekalude Vastradharanathekurichu” (About women’s dressing), *Grihalakshmi* vol. 8, no. 1, 1986, Pp. 8-11

<sup>vii</sup> M. Bhaskaran, “Misravidhyabyasathinte Purogathy” (The Progress of Mixed Education), comic column, *Viswaroopam* vol. 1, no. 1, (Aug. 1940), p. 11.

<sup>viii</sup> Cartoon, *Grihalakshmi* vol.4, no.2, (August 1982), p. 24

<sup>ix</sup> Gopikrishnan, “Samajam Sarojam,” cartoon column, *Grihalakshmi* vol. 13, no. 5 (1991), p. 74.

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- <sup>x</sup>Cartoon, *Grihalakshmi* vol. 8, no.5, (November 1986), p.49  
<sup>xi</sup> Cartoon, *Grihalakshmi* vol.2, no.6, (December 1980), p. 15; Cartoon, *Grihalakshmi* vol.1, no.7, (April 1980), p. 24  
<sup>xii</sup> Yesudasan, “Mrs. Nairude Rahasyangal” (Secrets of Mrs. Nair) *Vanitha*, vol. 18, no.1 (March 1993), pp. 110-113.  
<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid., p. 110  
<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>xv</sup> Discussion, “woman in cartoons and humour,” *Grihalakshmi* vol.4, no.3, (September 1982), pp. 8-11, 43  
<sup>xvi</sup> Ibid., p. 9

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